

5 WESTERN Novels

Magazines

OCT.
25¢

PICACHO VALLEY WAR CALL
By LARRY A. HARRIS

GHOST GUN SNOWDOWN
By JOE ARCHERD

WILD GESE CALLING
By WILLIAM FREEMAN HUGH

TROUBLE IS WHERE
YOU FIND IT
By BEN H. SANDERSON

TRAIL'S END
AT THE HANGTREE
By DWIGHT KENNEDY

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FIVE WEEKLY PAGES
OCT 1951



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5 WESTERN Novels

MAGAZINE

Vol. 4, No. 3

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

October, 1951

PICACHO VALLEY WAR CALL

Lisa Bradshaw was beautiful and clever, and brave enough to face blazing guns, but she fell in love with a sheepman

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GHOST GUN SHOWDOWN

Al Spain always went unarmed—but that didn't keep Clee Bishop from recognizing his crookedness and combating it

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WILD GEESE CALLING

A handsome fighting man of the wilds champions Dora and her Dad on a perilous mission through the river country!

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Jim Barr wanted to settle down in the cattle country, but first there was some gunsmoke debris he had to clear away

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YOU don't have to be a mule to enjoy backpacking, one of the best ways to take a wilderness camping trip. It is not hard labor. It's fun.

Experienced hands at pack camping can easily cover 150 miles of woodland travel in a two-week camping trip. At the outset their packs weigh in the neighborhood of 50 pounds. That includes food, clothing, some means of shelter, essential cooking utensils, and a few extras such as fishing tackle or a camera.

Exactly what to take along on such a trip depends to a certain extent on the season, climate, your bedroll and your bankroll. Food needs, for instance, will be less—and lighten your pack load—if you are making your trip in country where there is a chance to add a few brook trout or fresh bass to your menu.

There are, however, certain general tips regarding equipment that are almost universally accepted by experienced back country foot-travelers such as trappers, prospectors and woodsmen as well as by back-packing-camping enthusiasts.

In the matter of food stay away from too many canned goods. They are awkward to pack, and the tins are a waste weight to carry when every added ounce counts. Stick as much as possible to staples and concentrated foods, and allow about two pounds of foodstuffs per day per man.

FOR TWO persons on a two-week trip the following, or a close variation, will provide an adequate diet and a chance for

mixed menus that will vary the monotony of beans, bacon and biscuits:

2 lbs. dried apples; 1 lb. dried apricots; 2 lbs. bacon (chunk rather than sliced); 2 lbs. dried beans; ½ lb. baking powder; ½ lb. baking soda; 1 lb. corn meal (more if you intend to catch many fish); 2 lbs. oleo, or butter in cans; 28 tea bags; 1 lb. coffee; 1 lb. cocoa; 3 lbs. cheese; 3 lbs. hard crackers; 5 lbs. flour; 1 lb. (about) Jello, assorted flavors; 1 lb. egg powder; 2 lbs. dried beef; 1 lb. peanut or apple butter spreads; 1 lb. onions; 2 lbs. rice (less bulky than potatoes); 2 lbs. spaghetti; 1 lb. oatmeal; 4 lbs. sugar; 4 lbs. dried milk; 1 lb. (about) assorted prepared puddings; 3 lbs. corned beef in cans; 2 lbs. dried soup vegetables; 1 lb. chocolate.

This is about the minimum mixed menu and counts on the addition of fresh fish or small game to round out the meat courses.

Clothes should include a wide-brimmed felt hat; flannel shirt; extra set of underwear; spare socks; stout camping pants (worn inside boots if full-length trousers are preferred); strong, comfortable walking boots (army combat style okay); thin socks worn next to feet with wool socks to be worn over them (don't take or wear a darned pair or socks with holes in them); 3 bandanna handkerchiefs; sweater or wool overshirt for cool evenings; shaving and toilet kit, face towel, etc.

You will find these additional items handy, almost essential: 1 light ax; folding lantern with 1 doz. candles for it; pocket knife; about 40 ft. ¾ inch rope (whipped at the ends) to

(Turn to page 8)

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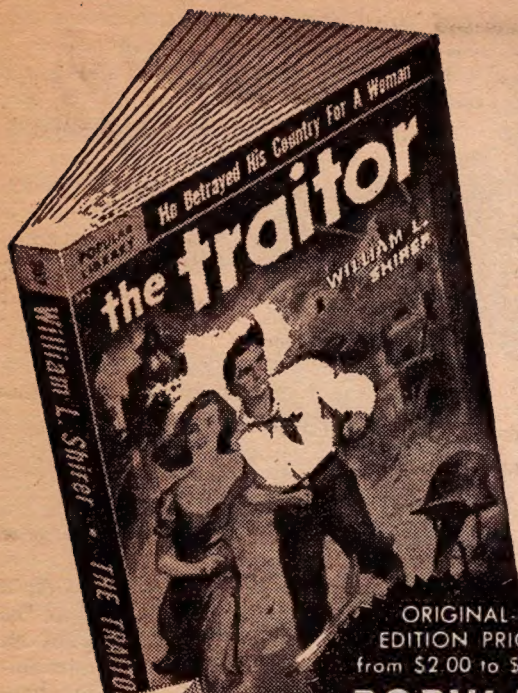
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be used in hanging your shelter cloth or setting up light tent; matches and small special reserve supply in waterproof container. For cooking utensils you will need a canteen, frying pan with folding handle, cooking knife, long-handled cooking fork, small stew pan with cover, and your individual knife, fork, spoon and plate.

A sleeping bag, even a light one, is bulky. But you can make a cot-size bag of strong bed ticking. It will fold into a small bundle for carrying and can be filled with browse, dried leaves, or light spruce boughs to make a mattress of it at night. A single 3 lb. blanket on top of such a bed is warm enough for average pack-back-camping weather. In the late fall, or if traveling at high altitudes, a double blanket may be needed as added protection.

WHILE you are not likely to forget your fishing tackle, camera or rifle (if you intend to carry one), there are some small, mighty useful items you may overlook. For instance an extra set of boot laces, safety pins, and a sewing kit containing needles, strong thread and a small assortment of spare buttons. A First Aid kit is, of course, a must on the list.

Handy bits of equipment, light enough for the back-packer to take along and too often neglected by the camper are a folding canvas water bucket (weight about 10 ounces), half dozen nails large enough to be used as camp clothes-hangers or to string your camp wash line on, and a detailed map of the country you intend to travel in. Carry the map in your pocket for quick access in checking up on trail crossings, streams, mountain divides, nearest highways, and so forth. A compass, too, is well worth its weight in real wilderness country, where you'd be surprised how easily a fellow can manage to get his directions twisted.

To carry your pack load you will probably use either one of the standard pack boards, a roomy rucksack, or some form of shoulder harness. The choice is largely a matter of personal preference.

For the average pack camper a simple pack harness is light and inexpensive. It generally consists of shoulder straps connected by a single back strap through which may be looped two additional straps holding your pack roll. Avoid harnesses having crossed front straps, or a horizontal strap across the

chest. Designed to equalize the pack load, the front straps tend to press against the lungs, constricting breathing. You'll notice this when the going is tough, or on a long uphill climb.

A harness will take care of your outfit, if the latter is either packed inside your blankets and sleeping gear, or (more handily) in two medium-sized duffle bags. One bag (for grub and cooking utensils) is thus accessible without disturbing the other one (for bed gear and personal stuff).

WHETHER your night protection is a shelter cloth, or a light back-pack camper's tent, don't use either as the outside covering for your pack roll. A rip can be ruinous. Instead, wrap the whole outfit in a strong, waterproof canvas sheet. The added protection that is given is worth the extra weight.

Rucksacks or large flap-closed canvas bags are light and will hold a lot of stuff. They are ideal for short trips where night stops are scheduled to be made at regular camps, or camp cabins. Rucksacks, however, have a tendency to ride low under a heavy load. This throws much of the weight against the small of the back, a wrong and uncomfortable carrying method.

The pack-sacker toting his sleeping quarters with him on an extended trip will fare much better if he uses a regular packsack large enough to hold the camper's entire equipment and keep it riding well up on his shoulders. Such pack sacks come in many types. A good one, and long-time favorite among trappers and similarly experienced outdoorsmen, is the well-known "Duluth" sack. It is usually equipped with a tumpline or headstrap for extra heavy loads. With no stiff frame sides, it is made in the form of a simple bag with a large flap. It is easy to load, lies flat against the wearer's back, and weighs only about three pounds when it is empty.

For pack-board users a design such as the long-used "Yukon" is still a favorite. It has a spruce frame, canvas-covered and fitted with wide web shoulder straps. Adequate for outsize professional pack loads, it will handle a 50-pound carry easily. With a little experience most campers can stash a 100 pound load, if necessary, on such a frame and make with the feet all day long without much trouble.

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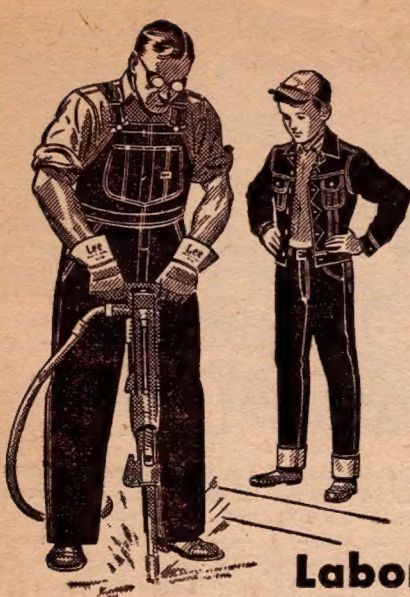
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The Checkerboard Ruse

—and how it fooled the Apaches

By Harold Helfer



THERE is some controversy over whether Jules Camou actually lent his name to the term meaning to disguise objects in time of war, and the similarity between the two may be only a coincidence, but the fact remains that this rather

fabulous ranchman located near the Mexican-United States border used the art of camouflage to get the upper hand over the Apache Indians more than a century ago.

Jules Camou owned a great ranch in the province of Sonora, Mexico. A horseman could travel for two days in one direction and still not get off Camou's property. Although actually a Frenchman, he lived in the boldy-hewn tradition of the great Spanish dons.

But he had one overriding problem. Much of his land was arid and deserty. Only one main spring ran through his land and it was near it that he built his ranch house. But in the dry seasons the spring was reduced to a trickle and it barely supplied the needs of himself and his ranch hands, let alone his thousands of cattle, many of whom would perish from thirst.

It came to Jules Camou that there was one way he could lick the water problem and create one of the truly magnificent ranches of the continent. And that was to dam up the stream and create a lake which would make water available all the year around.

But, though he was a firm and forceful man, Jules Camou kept putting off the actual construction of the project. It was because of the Apaches. They envied the large land holdings of the Frenchman and were exceedingly troublesome. He knew they would never docilely permit the undertaking.

Finally, though, with the drouth seasons seeming to grow worse, Jules Camou decided to go through with the construction of the dam. But first he had his peons, working quietly day and night, build two towers, one on each side of the ranchouse. Made of stone, the structures were circular and reached a height of thirty-five feet. Inside, a crude ladder, fashioned out of cactus shoots, led to a platform at the top, where a series of five-inch square holes had been punched out

all around the wall. Each tower could hold fifty men and there were enough holes for each to blaze away at attacking Indians.

Camou's plan was to have guards in the tower while the workmen labored away at the dam. From their vantage point, the guards could see for many miles around and would be able to sound the warning in case the Apaches attacked.

So, on the day the twin towers were completed, Jules Camou stepped back to view his "masterpiece of defense" with considerable pride. Right away, something struck him as being wrong. The two circular structures loomed out boldly and seemed indestructible. And yet the Frenchman felt a jarring note—something was wrong.

Gradually it came to him what it was—the several bands of holes that went around the tops of the towers. They stood out so clearly, they were dark squares against a background of gray. The apaches were dead shots, with guns as well as arrows. The dark squares would present prime targets for them.

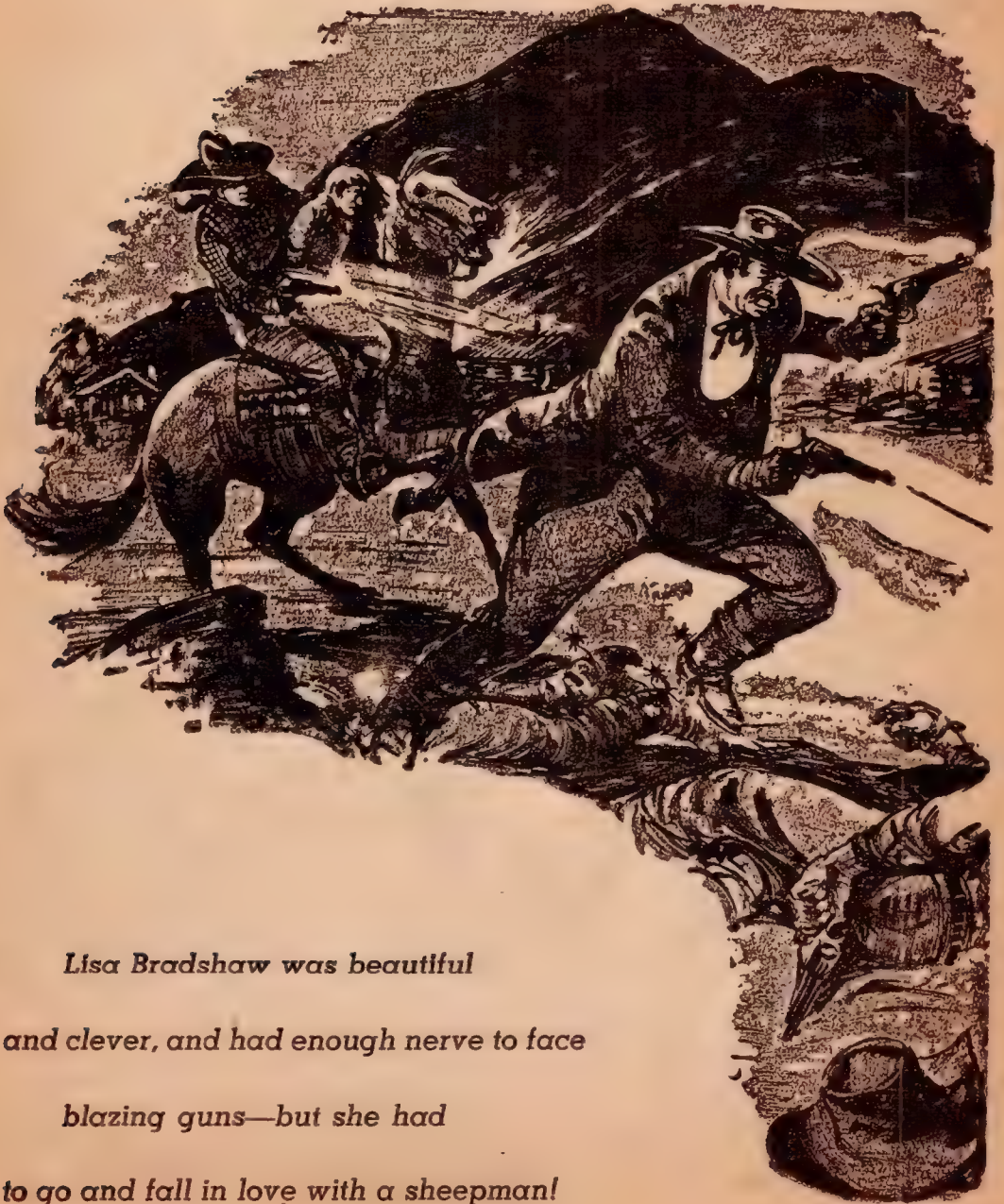
Dismay filled Jules Camou for the strongest tower would be of no avail if its defenders kept falling with bullets or arrows through their heads. But, little by little, an idea took hold in him. He had his peons go out and fetch wild berries. Then he had these berries squeezed, until several brilliantly-colored stains had been obtained. Then, with these homemade dyes, he painted the outside of the towers at the top.

Each tower top then, in effect, was turned into a huge cylindrical checkerboard. There were stripes of red broken up with squares of other colors. Each of the portholes became a square in the checkerboard. But now you couldn't tell which were the holes.

The art of camouflage is generally regarded as having come into its own militarily in World War I. But three-quarters of a century before, Jules Camou had conceived its fundamental principle and had put it into effect to thwart an Indian foe.

The Apaches attacked many times, but the baffling giant "checkerboards" from which gunfire blazed away but which revealed no openings, were too much for them. The dam, 400 feet long and five feet high, was successfully built, creating a life-giving lake that covered 400 acres and is still one of the marvels of that part of an otherwise arid world.

PICACHO VALLEY



*Lisa Bradshaw was beautiful
and clever, and had enough nerve to face
blazing guns—but she had
to go and fall in love with a sheepman!*

WAR CALL

A Novel by LARRY A. HARRIS

I

NIGHT settled over Picacho Valley like a benediction. From the pine-studded slopes of the Guadalupe a soothing breeze swept gently across the valley where the grama-grass was dead and brown.

That breeze smelled of rain that never fell. Dipper Bar cows smelled it. They bawled mournfully. A mile

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A Land-Grabber's Killer Crew Brings a Reign

from the scattered buildings of the Dipper Bar they stood knee-deep in a murky water-hole that was rapidly sinking into the sand.

The windows of the ranchhouse shone with light. A red moon cast a hazy pall over the white-washed corrals and the thick-walled 'dobe outbuildings. In the deep gloom near the door of the bunkhouse a dozen riders talked and smoked.

From the main ranchhouse, Lisa Bradshaw stepped out on the vine-clad portico, hearkening to the familiar sounds. Then she hurried toward a shed where she kept her horse. As she passed near the bunkhouse all talk ceased. Only the dull red glow of cigarettes told of men hunkered there in the darkness.

Lisa Bradshaw felt the impact of their curious eyes. Dipper Bar men who had eagerly obeyed her slightest whim for years. Men who would ride to hell and back for Lisa Bradshaw, the motherless daughter of old King Bradshaw.

They liked her, those men. Respected her. But of late they had avoided her. When she had met any of the men about the place the friendliness of their greetings had been lacking. Lisa knew why.

In the shed she slapped a rig on her horse as expertly as a man. Bridling, she led the animal toward the door. She saw her father, then. He was standing just outside the door of the shed, a huge-bodied man who looked even larger in the moonlight. Lisa walked up to him, like a child who has been caught swiping apples.

"Want to see me, Dad?" she asked quietly.

"Where you ridin' tonight, Lisa?"

Old King Bradshaw's voice was stern, but not unkindly. In the gloom his heavy-jowled face was grim-lined. Worry puckered his eyes. A worry Lisa had watched grow during the past month. Now, instead of flaming anger at his gruff challenge, she felt a stab of pity. She realized more than ever how her father's hair had whitened.

"I'm riding up to the mesa rim, Dad," she said evenly.

King Bradshaw took a deep breath. His eyes flamed.

"Ridin' up to the mesa rim again," he boomed accusingly, "to see Dal Kinney."

"Yes, Dad."

"Dal Kinney!" fumed Bradshaw. "You, Lisa Bradshaw, coyotin' over to the rim to be courted by a damned Texan!" His fist rose tremblingly. "I hoped I'd never live to see the day my own daughter was mooned over by a Texican!"

"Steady, Dad!"

LISA stood stiff and pale in the gloom. With the rebellion youth has for parental dictates in affairs of the heart, she struggled against her own emotions.

"Dal Kinney!" rapped Bradshaw, scorn in his voice. "Homesteader who raises sheep! Son of a migratin' clan who are robbin' us cowmen blind of land while our beef dies for lack of pasture and water. I was hopin' you had forgot him, Lisa. Tonight the cowmen are meetin' here to discuss means of oustin' them land-jumpers by reason or force. Morg Pawley—"

"Morg Pawley!" Lisa flared indignantly. "It's about time you opened your eyes, Dad! About time you and the other honest cowmen in this valley shook off the influence of this—this cheap town boss! He's goading you into trouble that can mean but one thing—war! As for Dal Kinney, I don't mind telling you, Dad, I'm proud of him! He's a man! And if you weren't so blind you could see it. Sheep or no sheep, I love him!"

Lisa flung herself into the saddle. Touching spurs to her pony, she raced out of the ranch yard. She didn't look back at her father. She didn't see his powerful shoulders slump, and the whipped look come into his eyes.

Through a blur of tears, Lisa saw the towering jagged peaks of the Guadalupe ahead of her across the brush-dotted, moonlit valley. The wind fanned her flushed cheeks, seemed to soothe the turmoil that boiled within her.

Leaping her horse across dry washes, she rode like an Apache. With a feeling of dread, yet gladness, she was relieved that the showdown with her father was over. For a month she had seen it coming.

of Outlawry and Injustice to the Guadalupes!

That her father had known of her nocturnal visits to the mesa rim to meet Dal Kinney she never once doubted. Now a feeling of guilt came to her as she recalled the hurt look in her father's eyes at her impetuous words. She remembered how his hair had grayed the past few weeks. Had she been the cause of that? Or was it his brooding over the drought, the impending trouble?

For the first time in her twenty years,

whether the animal was worth breaking. But there was one thing Bradshaw didn't understand. He hadn't since his wife had died, leaving him with a baby girl. That was Lisa.



The three riders whirled and streaked down the street

Lisa felt the need of a woman's companionship, an older woman's advice; a mother.

Not that King Bradshaw wasn't all that a father could be. He was. King Bradshaw understood cows and men—and guns. He could look at a mustang and tell

King Bradshaw had watched her grow into a gangling, freckle-faced girl. Impudent, yet a laughing, lovable kid who preferred faded levis and scuffed boots to gingham dresses and buttoned shoes. She whacked off her pigtails at fourteen and broke her first bronc. At fifteen she out-

shot one of the boasting cowhands with a six-gun, firing at a milk can at sixty paces. Then she hoorahed him off the place.

As Lisa grew into a lovely tanned-cheek woman, the barrier between her and King Bradshaw had grown. She had a light in her dark brown eyes, an unconscious, natural beauty that made men look twice, and women look with envy. Her carefree laughter made men unconsciously fumble with their hats.

She had a way of saying things that brought results. The twelve or so riders around the Dipper Bar jumped when she spoke. Stumpy Wells, the ramrod, chewed tobacco. When Lisa spoke his jaws would stop moving. He would listen until she was through.

It got around among them that she had been born during a sandstorm. That was why she was so fiery and impetuous, they said. Yet King Bradshaw worshiped her.

With thoughts of her father troubling her, Lisa loped her horse up a winding trail that led into the foothills where scrub oak jutted from the slopes. Farther ahead the pines and spruce rose into the starlit sky.

Swinging out on a mesa, she halted in the shadow of a tree, near the rim. A figure hurried out of the gloom to meet her. She flung herself from her horse, running.

"Dal!" she cried softly. "Dal!"

She thrilled to the feel of Dal Kinney's strong arms about her. He called her name. The sound of his voice, the very closeness of this tall, broad-shouldered young homesteader renewed her courage. She pushed back from him, looked up into his steady blue eyes. Words were such futile things. She had so much she wanted to tell him.

"You're tremblin', honey," he said. "You—"

"It's Dad, Dal."

"He's found out—about us?"

She nodded. They fell silent, gazing off across the gloom at the twinkling lights of the Dipper Bar ranchhouse down in the valley below them.

HAND in hand they stood, each stirred with brooding thoughts of what the future held for them.

"Lisa," Dal Kinney murmured at last, "I'm to blame. I should have ridden down and talked with your father weeks ago,

told him of our plans. I've been a fool to think things would work out by themselves. I've only made it harder for you."

"It would have done no good, Dal," she said hopelessly. "You don't know Dad like I do." Her voice broke.

Quickly she told him of the meeting tonight down at the Dipper Bar. Morg Pawley would be there. Pawley with his gunmen. Every honest cowman in the Picacho Valley would attend.

In his subtle, clever way Pawley, as spokesman, would continue to goad the cowmen's ill feeling against the homesteaders here in the foothills. He would explain that with the Texas homesteaders out of the hills there would be new pasture and water, enough to tide all the herds in the valley through the drought. Of course, he wouldn't talk war, openly. But that was what Morg Pawley was leading up to—war!

"I'm afraid, Dal," Lisa said breathlessly. "For the first time in my life, I'm afraid. For you!"

She felt the steely muscles in his arm draw taut. When she looked up into his eyes she saw the trouble that roweled him.

"I've heard Pawley's loose talk in town, honey," he said slowly. "I don't want war. I know what it is. That's why my folks are up here now. War in Texas broke us. We drifted up here—Dad and his clan—to start brand-new, with sheep. All we want now is peace."

"Peace," she whispered bitterly. "As far back as I can remember there has been trouble in this valley. Dal, I hate it! I want to get out"—she clutched him impulsively—"with you. Go farther west, start over. I—"

"You mean that, honey?" Kinney asked, startled.

"Yes," she whispered breathlessly. "Yes."

Of all the things in the world, Lisa Bradshaw treasured most Dal Kinney's love. In this tall, hard-muscled, hard-riding Texan she had found her ideal.

Maybe it was the barrier between them that made her want him all the more. Maybe it was because Dal Kinney, this stalwart son of the nester kingpin, had an alchemy of manliness lacking in the other boys in the valley.

"You've thought such a move over,

Lisa?" Kinney was saying. His voice trembled just the slightest.

"I love you, Dal!"

He lifted her up to him as if she had been a child. She gave a choked cry.

He whispered her name over and over. Then she closed her eyes as his lips pressed hers. When he let her feet touch the ground again she tried not to think. But the sudden image of her father rose up before her.

Torn with conflicting emotions, she ran toward her horse. Dal Kinney called to her.

"Tomorrow night, Lisa! Meet me here. I'll have the license."

"Yes, Dal!"

Back in the saddle, Lisa spurred along the dark trail that led down into the valley. She flung a quick glance back over her shoulder. Back there on the mesa rim she glimpsed the dim figure of Dal Kinney. He was waving to her. She waved back. Then she rounded a curve in the trail.

Suddenly a rider loomed up in the trail just ahead. Lisa throttled the urge to cry out. Fear clutched at her heart. Then as the man yelled to her she reined in to a bunch-footed halt.

"Stumpy!" she cried.

She glared at the warped-legged older, ramrod for the Dipper Bar. Lisa Bradshaw had never known fear. She couldn't account for her sudden apprehension at meeting Stumpy Wells out here on the trail. Her relief turned to anger.

"Stumpy, I'd have shot at you if I'd had a gun. That's how you frightened me!"

II

LISA liked Stumpy Wells, this war-scarred old cowpuncher. Since she could remember he had worked for her father. She had confided many things to him she had never told her father. Now she watched the workings of his seamed, leathery face. She noticed the two black-buffed six-guns girding his narrow waist. Ordinarily he carried but one gun.

"You already talked with Dal Kinney?" he asked calmly.

"Yes," she flared defiantly. "What if I have?"

"Nothin'. I figured you had."

Lisa wanted to put Stumpy Wells in his

place and let him know it was none of his business whether she had met Dal Kinney or not. But she didn't. She knew the older had something on his mind, something that pertained to her own welfare.

"I heard the spat you had with the old man," Stumpy explained. "I didn't foller you up here jest to be snoopin', Lisa. I just felt kind of leary you ridin' the range alone, at night. Trouble is broodin', Lisa. If I'm readin' sign right war's gettin' ready to pop."

"Against Dal and his people—innocent people! And only to satisfy the selfishness of a lot of simple-minded cowmen who are letting Morg Pawley influence them!" Lisa was bitter. "What has everybody got against Dal? That he has gone in for sheep instead of cows?"

"It ain't Dal Kinney especially, Lisa," Stumpy explained, unabashed. "It's what he stands for—sheep! He's a Tejaner. And I wouldn't trust a Tejaner far as I could throw a bull by the tail. Dal Kinney hisself is kind of likable, a two-fisted sort of a gent. Still, he's a Texan."

Texan! He was a Texan and proud of it! Lisa saw the futility of arguing. Stumpy Wells' dislike for Texans was typical of all the cowmen in Picacho Valley. It was the undying hate cowmen have for bleating sheep, and the men who run them.

Lisa wheeled sharply. Down the trail toward the valley floor she rode through the darkness. She didn't look back. But she knew Stumpy Wells was riding at her heels. Her gun-guardian! Her cheeks burned at the thought.

The Dipper Bar house was ablaze with light. Coming into the yard, Lisa saw the saddled ponies standing beneath the whispering cottonwoods near the house. Cowmen's horses.

The front room was crowded with men. The deep, bass voice of Morg Pawley struck high above the babble, calling for silence. Morg Pawley was powerful, the cowmen said. He was a rancher himself. He owned the saloon in town. He had money.

"We're not here to talk war, gentlemen!" Pawley's voice boomed out. "Live and let live is my motto. All we want to do is seek some means of gettin' them Texas homesteaders in the hills to split their water and pasture with us. They got

more'n they need. I broached the matter to old Hook Kinney and he laughed at me."

Lisa wanted to cry. She wanted to fight. Hers was a will that knew no compromise. Yet in the very tenor of Morg Pawley's words she sensed a will stronger than her own. In Pawley she sensed a sinister influence that was guiding her own people to war against—Dal!

Angered, indignant, Lisa rode to the shed. From the house Morg Pawley's indistinct words seemed to mock her, flaunt her helplessness. Quickly she unbridled and jerked the rig, pegged them. Then she ran through the darkness toward the kitchen door.

She stepped inside. Pale moonlight, like mist, speared through a window. She hesitated, listening to Morg Pawley's voice that carried from the front room. Then a figure moved silently across the dark kitchen toward her.

"Tonca!" whispered Lisa.

Tonca was a Yaqui woman, ageless, fat, wrinkled. She had cooked at the Dipper Bar since Lisa was a baby. When Lisa's mother died she had mothered the orphaned baby. Staunchly loyal, silent, she had but one love. That was Lisa. She would die for Lisa.

In the gloom, Tonca's eyes were red pools of trouble. She waddled up to Lisa, whispered in the Spanish tongue.

"*Guerra, chiquita*. War! I see it coming."

"Not if I can help it, Tonca!"

Lisa started toward the hallway. Tonca clutched her arm, a haunted, fearful look in her eyes.

"Lisa!" she beseeched. "To go in there will only kindle the flame. By the good Dios, white men—"

"Are fools!" Lisa said angrily. "Wait!"

SHE ran to the door that led into the room. Pale, trembling with resentment, she steeled herself. Then she flung open the door, stepped quickly into the room.

Through a smoke haze she gave one glance to the men in that room. They stared at her, surprised. No word was spoken. No one moved. There were the Dipper Bar men, grim-faced, sullen. There was Hoke Raydor of the Lazy R, a fiery, shrewd cowman and a fighter every inch

of his six-foot frame. Lon Twining, Strib Wines. Heavy-shouldered Hunt Borland, half-drunk. Jeff Benson. And others.

Lisa knew these men. Cowmen. Big men physically who had fought like hell for what they had. They would fight to retain it. Men who had hearts of gold. Kindly, gruff men who smelled of stale tobacco and horses.

Among them was King Bradshaw. He seemed to read in Lisa's blazing brown eyes what was to come. He looked at this slim-waisted, denim-clad daughter of his reprovingly. Her condemning glance answered him plainer than words. His full-fleshed body settled in his rawhide-bottomed chair.

"I hadn't counted on ladies bein' present," said Morg Pawley. "But now that you're here, set down, Miss Lisa."

Lisa glared at him, loathing the sound of his suave speech. His thick lips spread into an oily smile. He stood in the center of the room on wide-spread, columnlike legs. He wore a black business suit and two color, hand-stitched boots. A giant of a man, thick-shouldered, bull-like, with milky gray eyes too close set on either side of his flattened nose to be honest. Lisa hated him.

"I won't need to sit to have my say, Morg Pawley!"

Lisa hardly recognized the sound of her own voice. She fought off the weakness in her knees, avoiding her father's eyes.

Old King Bradshaw stirred. "Maybe you'd better go on to bed, Lisa," he said sternly. "What we're sayin' has no interest to you."

"No interest to me?" Lisa snapped. "Not much, Dad, except that I hate to see this—this cheap town boss that you're listening to make such fools of you all! She flung her glance back to Morg Pawley. "You!" she cried accusingly. "You stirring these men into trouble that will bring ruin to the valley! You trying to take the land and water from those Texas homesteaders that is rightfully theirs!"

Her words, crackling with fury, ran on and on. She hardly knew what she was saying. She was giving vent to a hate she had felt for this blustering saloonman-rancher since he had asked her to marry him and she had refused. He had been so cock-sure that she would jump at the chance to become his bride.

Now some of the men in the room stirred uncomfortably. They looked at Morg Pawley. His face was white about the cheek-bones. Sweaty King Bradshaw sat stunned, rooted to his chair.

"And that land being theirs by law, Mr. Pawley, makes it none of your stick in!" Lisa flung at him. "It looks to me as if you've got an ax to grind in wanting to run them out. My advice to you cowmen is to go on home!"

Morg Pawley's huge hand lifted haltingly. He tried to smile to veil his fury.

"That's just it, Lisa—"

"Miss Bradshaw to you, tinhorn!" she blazed.

Morg Pawley's square-jawed face colored. He bowed, smirked. "That's just it, Miss Bradshaw. They *don't* own the land they're on. Those Texan land-grabbers you've been so friendly with have never filed on the land they're squattin' on!"

The cowmen in the room tensed, forgetting for the moment this spunky, flashing-eyed daughter of their leader.

"What you mean, Pawley?" snapped Hunt Borland harshly.

Towering above the seated men, Morg Pawley gloated over them knowingly.

"Just what I said, Borland. I was just gettin' ready to tell you when this—when Miss Bradshaw interrupted me. Stand up and tell 'em about it, Sid."

Like a jack-in-the-box, a man in one corner jumped to his feet. Lisa hadn't noticed him before. He was a chinless little man with eyes that wouldn't hold still.

"Morg Pawley is right!" he piped shrilly. "I'm the county clerk and I ought to know. Them Texans ain't never filed on that there land. It ain't theirs, it ain't. I see no reason why you gentlemen

can't go up there and move 'em out if their pasture and water will tide you all through the drought."

Swaggering Morg Pawley waved dramatically to another man who sat close to Sid Tipton, the county clerk.

"What's the other branch of the law got to say about it, Sheriff?" he boomed, ignoring Lisa Bradshaw.

SHERIFF ANTON MACHADO rose to his feet. He tried to look important. How this mustached, pockmarked half-breed had ever got into the sheriff's office no one quite knew. Except that Pawley had said he was a good man.

"We mus' no' have war," Machado purred. "Eet has come to my ears that some of you gentlemen an' thees sheepmen have quarrel. That mus' stop, hear me? Me, I sugges' two-three you men go weeth Meester Pawley an' offer to buy these Texans out. Then"—he shrugged—"they weel move."

He sat down. His words lingered in the room of silent, grim-faced men. Dumbfounded, Lisa stared at those men. She was positive that Dal had filed on his land. He had told her all about it, how he would have to prove up on it. Dal and those other Texans were proud of their holdings. She knew they would die before they would give it up.

"That's a lie about Dal Kinney and those folks not filing, Morg Pawley!" she cried vehemently. She realized she was making a fool of herself. Hot tears flooded her eyes. She saw none of those men believed her. They were siding with Pawley! "That's a lie! A lie!"

Face purpling with rage, Morg Pawley took a quick step forward. Trembling like

[Turn page]

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a mighty oak in the wind, King Bradshaw rose to meet him. The other men came to their feet. Men whose nerves were sawed raw by the drought. Seeing their beef losses mount to ruining proportions had done something to these men.

"Steady, Pawley!" Bradshaw's voice cut through the muttering. "Lisa is my daughter. Careful what you say. After all, my holdings are hers. She's got a right to speak her piece, even if she is spurred by prejudice."

"Prejudice!" sneered Pawley. "More'n that, Bradshaw, if you ask me. Bein' courted by one of them sheep-lovin' Texans she's naturally standin' up for 'em."

"If stompin' out their breed will save us, I say let's do it!" roared big Strib Wines angrily.

"Me, I'm the law! You can't—"

"To hell with your law, Machado, if it's a matter of savin' our places!" yelled Borland hoarsely.

Above the tumult, Lisa cried scathingly: "Yellow hides, too! My own kin, but there's not a man but Dad among the whole caboodle of you with a sense of justice!"

III

CHOKING with uncontrollable rage, Pawley said something. Lisa screamed as her father's fist smashed into the big saloonman's jaw. Pawley reeled back, cursing through bleeding lips. Men yelled, struggling to separate Pawley and Bradshaw.

The room swirled in front of Lisa's eyes. Just then the door at her back flew open, and into the room rushed a man, head bandaged, eyes wild with excitement.

"Rorison!" thundered Pawley, tearing loose from the arms that held him. "What is it, Rorison?"

Rorison, the man with the bandaged head, took one look at the bewildered cowmen in the room.

"Fannin!" he yelled. "Them damned sheepmen—two of 'em—they just jumped Fannin and me as we was on our way here. They throwed down on us 'fore we had a chance. They killed Fannin. I got away!"

Lisa Bradshaw's ears throbbed. Yelling, cursing, the cowmen barged out of the room. They ran out into the night, shout-

ing that Bill Fannin, a cowman, had been killed by sheepmen.

Those cowmen wouldn't have acted like that a year ago. They would have listened to the sane reasoning of King Bradshaw. Radiating power, he would have stood before them, pointing out the right course for them to take. And they would have listened.

The hoofbeats of the departing cowmen faded into the night. Lisa realized her father had his arms about her. She looked up, saw the beaten look in his eyes. His hair was white as alkali. Pity choked her. She wanted to help him to a chair and tell him what a fool she had been. But she didn't.

"You—you're tired, Dad," she whispered unsteadily. "Go to bed. We can talk in the morning."

Dropping his arms, King Bradshaw turned, strode from the room without a word. King Bradshaw was an old man, stripped of his power. Lisa hadn't realized it until tonight.

Until the early morning hours, Lisa rolled and tossed in her bed, tormented by the uncertainty of the future. Through her bedroom window streamed the moonlight. It cast distorted shadows from the buildings to the ground. Everything was quiet. Then from far off across the drought-stricken valley came the low moan of cattle. Cattle that were dying for lack of water and pasture.

A gentle breeze whispered through Lisa's open window. It seemed to whisper of trouble. Trembling, she rose and dressed. On tiptoes she made her way through the house to the portico. She stood in the moonlight, her dark hair framing the beauty of her face.

"Sit down, Lisa."

She gave a little choked cry, like a person suddenly awakened from a dream. King Bradshaw was sitting in the deep shadows beneath the vines. In his voice, Lisa caught gentleness.

"I couldn't sleep, Dad."

She tried to make her voice sound casual. She sat down on the edge of the porch. They gazed out across the moonlit valley. Some strange, magnetic power seemed to draw them together, and for the first time in their lives they understood one another.

"War is comin', Lisa," said King Brad-

shaw. No fear in his words. Just the voice of a man who faces facts. "It'll mean bloodshed, grief for the womenfolks. Men have fought like wolves for these valleys and mountains. They'll continue to fight until it is tamed. That'll be years yet—years."

Lisa remained silent, quivering inside. It was the first time her father had ever talked to her like this.

"Selfishness is fetchin' this trouble, honey. Maybe Morg Pawley has a reason for wantin' war with the sheepmen. I can't figure his reason out. Maybe I've been mistaken in him, but he's got the cowmen believin' in him, Lisa. If anything happens to me, I want you—"

"Dad!" Lisa cried, a choke in her voice.

King Bradshaw looked away to hide the mist in his eyes.

"I've been thinkin' about Dal Kinney, honey."

"He's—wonderful, Dad."

King Bradshaw nodded just the slightest. "You're fiery, impetuous—like me, Lisa. But I'm heedin' your judgment. A good woman can spot a good man every time." His voice faltered. "Your mother—you remind me so much of her. Don't know whether you ever knew or not, honey, but we eloped."

"Then you mean—"

"Why not, honey?" King Bradshaw struggled to hold his voice steady. "I wish it was so we could have the weddin' here at the ranch. Wish I could invite all them Texas folks and talk our differences over to the tune of the weddin' march. Maybe I've been harsh in my judgment of them. I'm lookin' to you now, Lisa. I'm done!"

LISA couldn't talk. Words wouldn't come. She ran back into the house. Alone in her room again she knelt beside her bed. She closed her eyes and tears stained her cheeks. Moonlight shone through the window upon her like a blessing.

Lisa Bradshaw prayed. Self-contained Lisa Bradshaw asked a power stronger than man's to look out for those she loved.

"Take care of them, God," she whispered. "Take care of them."

Toward dawn she fell asleep.

She got up and ate breakfast that Tonca had prepared for her. It seemed like a dream, all that had happened last night.

Activity was as usual about the Dipper Bar. Riders rode in and out, but there wasn't the loud, bantering talk as usual. The men had guns strapped about their waists. They obeyed Stumpy Wells' snapped orders and said nothing.

King Bradshaw had ridden to the lower pasture to see about the water, Tonca told Lisa. And Lisa felt the old Yaqui woman's inquisitive eyes searching her face.

"You pale, *chiquita*. You sick? No?"

"No, Tonca. I feel all right."

Tonca wasn't satisfied. She waddled into the kitchen, returned to the long, empty dining room where Lisa ate alone. She sat down across the table from Lisa, and said:

"War. Eet ees coming, Lisa."

Lisa looked up. She had been forcing every mouthful of food into her mouth:

"Stop it, Tonca!"

Tonca rose and waddled back to the kitchen, mumbling to herself. She moved with deceptive liteness for her size.

"Me hear," she said awesomely. "Me know."

Lisa left the remainder of her breakfast untouched. She hurried back to her room. She stayed there the rest of the day, undisturbed. All during the long, hot afternoon she breathed a fervent prayer for the hours to pass, for night to come. The silence jangled her nerves. That very placidity presaged trouble.

She waited until the mantle of darkness spread over the valley. Then she lighted the kerosene lamp in her room. She opened her top dresser drawer. She had put on her whipcord riding breeches and polished boots. She hadn't worn them much, for she had preferred overalls and cowhide boots.

A folded piece of paper on top of her clothes in the drawer caught her eye. It was a note, written in pencil, in the heavy, laborious scrawl of her father. She read:

Lisa:

You'll find a gold necklace in a box underneath these clothes. It was worn by your mother the day we were married. Wear it tonight and keep it, always. God bless you both.

Your dad

Through a mist, Lisa read the words again. She found the gold necklace. It was a delicate little chain with a locket, worn smooth by time. There in the fluttering lamplight Lisa held it in her hands.

She imagined her mother was there in the room with her. It was comforting to her in a way. She couldn't remember her mother, but she pictured her presence there as strongly as if there had been two souls in that room instead of one.

Lisa's lips quivered. "Help me, Mother," she whispered. "Give me the strength to help those I love."

Dressing, Lisa hurried through the house. Her father was nowhere about. The rattle of pans in the kitchen told her of Tonca's presence. On the way to the shed for her horse she only sent one swift glance toward the bunkhouse. A light shone within. But the men were nowhere about.

Quickly she saddled and bridled. Something kept telling her to hurry. Some uncanny, inner sense that chilled her with apprehension. Mounting, she rode out of the ranch yard. She looked back. A choke came into her throat.

Home! She wondered if she would ever see it again. The dogging image of her father came to her. He had aged so the past few months. Now she was leaving him, leaving her home—for Dal.

Not once did she question her love for this sturdy young Texan.

"Dal!" she cried. "Dal!"

Her voice was lost in the drum of hoofbeats. She rode swiftly, trying to brush aside her tormenting thoughts. The full moon shone down, etching the brushy valley floor in a hazy light, blotching it with black shadows.

DAL was waiting on the mesa rim. Lisa thought he was pale. Strength poured back into her trembling body with the feel of his comforting arms. The sound of his voice renewed her confidence.

"Ready, Lisa?" he whispered eagerly. "I rode into Roswell today and got the license. We'll go to Parson Rhodes' in Picacho if that's all right. Still feel equal to it, honey?"

"Yes, Dal," she replied gamely. "Yes."

She struggled to keep her voice steady. She didn't tell him of the change in attitude of her father. That could wait. That relentless feeling of danger still stirred tides of warning within her. She begged Dal Kinney to hurry.

They rode down across the valley, stirrup to stirrup. Two youngsters of frontier

breed, pale-faced, grim, ready to face what the future held for them with all the courage of their fathers and their forefathers before them. Across the moonlit valley where the bones of cows lay bleaching in the sand near the water-holes that were drying up day by day under the blistering sun.

They skirted the Dipper Bar Ranch, heading toward Picacho town, five miles to the west. They loped through the brushy wastelands within gunshot of other ranches, where men sat by lamplight, cleaning and oiling their guns, preparing for the inevitable—war!

Lisa Bradshaw and Dal Kinney were not running from the trouble that roweled their parents. They reconciled such stabs of conscience by telling themselves that their own future problems were greater than those that faced their folks. They were going away. Going to start anew, as their fathers had pulled away from home ties years before.

They tried to hide the tugging at their heart-strings. Lisa, her red lips pressed tightly together, her brown eyes flashing, displayed her determination to cast her lot with this two-fisted young Texan who loved her.

"What you thinkin' about, Lisa?" Dal Kinney asked with forced cheerfulness. "Thinking of Dad, Dal."

"I wish he liked me, Lisa. King Bradshaw is a mighty fine man."

"He does; Dal."

Lisa felt Dal's quick, searching glance. She said nothing more just then. They were already at the outskirts of Picacho town. Down the main street they cantered, side by side, straight and defiant. Past the false-fronted buildings and the blaring 'dobe saloon which bore the huge sign in front:

PAWLEY'S ACE HIGH SALOON

The other buildings might as well have had the same sign of ership printed upon their sun-baked walls. Pawley owned Picacho, lock, stock and barrel.

Lisa's chin juttled. She kept her eyes straight ahead down the light-splashed, noisy street. Anger flamed within her. She felt the speculative eyes of the townspeople turned toward her. One of those onlookers in front of the saloon made a sneering remark. Lisa's face flushed. Dal

cursed beneath his breath.

"Steady, Dal."

IV

FROM beneath the darkened canopies of the buildings those spectators watched Lisa and Dal. This was giving them plenty to talk about, Lisa reflected bitterly. These men, mostly Pawley's hangers-on and short-string cowmen, would label her a female Judas. They would hurry to Morg Pawley.

"Lisa Bradshaw just went past," they would announce to Pawley. "Just went past, ridin' with old Hook Kinney's son. She's turned agin her own clan."

Lisa sensed the unfriendliness of those stares. She wasn't thinking of herself. It was Dal. With Morg Pawley fanning the flame of war now that Bill Fannin had been bushwhacked, Dal's life wouldn't be worth a plugged peso if the pack broke its leash.

Then they were past the center of town.

"Dal!" she called softly. "Bill Fannin was killed last night."

"I know." Dal nodded grimly. "They say sheepmen killed him. Lisa, I happen to know there wasn't a single sheepman out of the hills last night. They was all at our place, visitin'."

Lisa knew he was telling the truth. She hardly realized it when they stopped in front of a little 'dobe home at the edge of town. Dal lifted her from the saddle. He was telling her to hurry. He must have been dogged by the same premonition that dampened her spirits.

Parson Rhodes was a wiry little man with the soulful blue eyes of a man who has been through hell and come out to preach the gospel. He met them at the door, a smoking lamp in one bony hand. Dal told them why they were there, and he invited them inside.

He called in his wife for one witness and the man who lived next door for the other. His wife was a plump, motherly soul. She watched her husband finger the rolled license Dal handed him. Then he got his Bible.

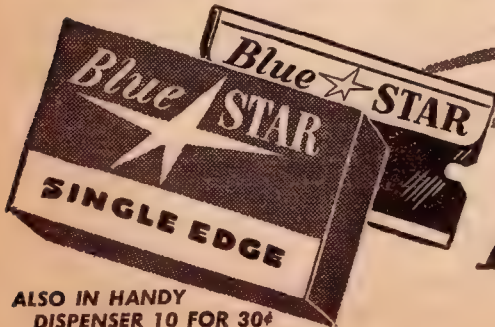
Trembling and shaken, Lisa stood at Dal

[Turn page]

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Kinney's side as Parson Rhodes began the ceremony. Dal's hand clasped hers. She thrilled to the feel of his strong fingers.

"You two young people are brought here in the eyes of God—"

Parson Rhodes' words sounded far away to Lisa. She was vaguely aware of muffled, raucous voices that drifted in through an open window from the lively saloon down the street.

Parson Rhodes paused, uneasily. In his right hand he gripped a worn Bible as a man holds a .45. Lisa struggled to keep from crying out:

"Hurry! Hurry!"

From outside in the street came the lifting beat of frantic hoofs. Then a man was running up on the front porch. Parson Rhodes and the two witnesses stared toward the doorway.

Dal Kinney whirled. Lisa turned. The door burst open. Limned in the threshold stood Red Parker, one of the Dipper Bar cowpunchers, his leathery, deep-lined face livid with excitement, anger.

"Lisa!" he rapped hoarsely. "They just gulched your dad! The sheepmen got him, damn 'em! They got him, and you're here marryin' one of their clan!"

Lisa stood rooted to the floor. She felt as if the walls had fallen, crushed her. Red Parker's face swam before her eyes. His condemning words rang in her ears.

"Dad?" she managed. "Dad's—dead?"

"Not when I left. He was callin' for you, Lisa! Come on!"

Blinded by grief, Lisa ran out into the night. Flinging herself into the saddle, she rode like mad back through the aroused town and out on the trail to the Dipper Bar.

At her heels trailed the puncher. While back in the parsonage Parson Rhodes stood transfixed. He had the worn Bible in one hand, holding it as a man holds a .45.

"War—war!" he kept repeating, as if he knew what it was.

Lisa hardly noticed when the cowboy spurred up to her side. Then she heard him yelling to her, his words barely audible above the roar of the wind and the beat of hoofs.

"We was settin' in the front room—your dad, Morg Pawley, the sheriff, half a dozen cowmen. The shot come through the open winder. Your pa fell. We all

fired through the winder but we missed."

"Then you didn't see the sheepmen who did it?" Lisa cried miserably.

"No we didn't see 'em!" Red Parker bellowed scornfully. "But some of Pawley's men come ridin' in later and said they seen two of Kinney's clan faunchin' for the hills!"

"Pawley!" she called bitterly. "Everybody is listening to him! Kinney's people don't fight from the brush. They don't want trouble!"

"Who else would it be but them Texans!" Parker scoffed. "Before they settled in the foothills all the cowmen was pullin' together. Since they come—" His wrathful words trailed off.

LISA closed her eyes against scalding tears. She tried to think clearly, and couldn't. She would never be convinced that Dal's people had killed Bill Fannin, and now her father. Never!

A time or two she had ridden secretly with Dal up to his cabin. She had met his father. She had instantly liked Hook Kinney, seeing in him honesty, admiring his grim courage in struggling to wrest a livelihood from those foothills.

Her brief visits had stirred her respect for the Texans. They didn't want trouble with the cowmen in the valley. They didn't want more land, or money. All they wanted was peace and a chance to live and rear their families.

They lived in rough log cabins in the foothills. Hardy, God-fearing mountain men with a strict sense of justice. Fifty or more of them, including their tired-faced womenfolks and children.

These people weren't responsible for the killings in the valley. Of that Lisa was positive. What possible motive could they have? No, it was a sinister power working among the cowmen, arousing them to war against the sheepmen. But why?

She thought of Morg Pawley. She shuddered with loathing. He was goading the cowmen into this trouble. But what did he expect to gain? Water? New pasture? There was more behind it than just that!

Dazed, Lisa looked at the Dipper Bar rider's stern profile. Suddenly, as if stabbed in the back, she straightened in the kak, curbing swiftly. Her horse slid on four feet. Parker reined in.

"What the—"

"Dal!" Lisa cried apprehensively. "I thought Dal was following us." She scanned the deserted, dark trail at their backs.

"Follerin' us?" Parker snapped incredulously. "Likely he's hightailin' it back to the hills before the townfolks string him up!"

"I'm going to make you eat those words some day, cowboy!" she fired at him, chokingly.

Whirling her horse, she was furiously pounding back over the dim trail toward town. She didn't look back. She knew the loyal cowpuncher would follow her. He might do a lot of swearing and grumbling but he would follow her through the leaping fires of hell.

Gnawing fear clutched at her heart. She had thought all along that Dal was riding at her heels. In her panic she had forgotten him when she left the parsonage. Now she realized she needed Dal more than ever; his comforting words, his help.

The unspoken words of the ceremony flashed into her mind. Words snatched from the minister's lips by the sudden appearance of this Dipper Bar hand.

"Until death do thee part—"

Lisa groaned. Back in Picacho where the feeling against all sheepmen ran high, Dal wouldn't have a ghost of a chance.

She hit the edge of town hugging the neck of her racing horse. Twenty feet behind her, still grumbling and cursing, rode Red Parker, his wiry little figure a part of his straining horse.

Just ahead, down the light-splashed street, Lisa saw a mob of men standing stiffly, like shadows, in front of Parson Rhodes' house. Their heads turned jerkily. When they saw her charging down on them they spread. She swooped down through them, dividing the pack. She saw Dal Kinney then. He was standing alone in the front yard, a leveled gun in his fist, facing the mob.

"Dal!" she called, wheeling in.

Dal Kinney kept his slitted eyes on the semi-circle of hard-faced men. They were Pawley's men, killers mostly, who stood wavering.

"I started to follow you, Lisa," Dal said tightly. "When I got to the door this gent"—he jerked his head toward a sprawled body close to the porch—"shoved this gun

in my ribs."

He grinned, cold as ice. Lisa had never seen Dal look like this before.

"These gents," he said, "were goin' to accommodate me with a hangin'."

Lisa whirled on the mob, eyes blazing. "You—you cowardly, hired rats!"

She called them everything she could think of. A leveled gun couldn't have had more effect on that mob than Lisa's invectives. Whipped, like curs, without a leader, they edged back.

"It's all right, honey. Let's go!"

Lisa turned. Dal Kinney was ahorse now. He pulled up beside her. He still had the gun in his fist. Parker was on her other side, two guns poking straight at the crowd. Right or wrong, Red Parker would fight beside her. Back in the shadows of the porch stood Parson Rhodes, the Bible still clutched in his hand.

THEY eased their horses out into the street. Dal hipped sideward in the kak.

"You ride on with Parker, Lisa," he ordered. "I'll follow. This pack of hellions is goin' to stand hitched till you strike the trail."

"We'll ride together, Dal, or we won't ride at all!" she said firmly.

Dal faced the stirring crowd, grinned. But the promise of death was in his eyes.

"Steady, you passel of skunks!" he breathed. "The first gent that gets itchy to shoot is only askin' for lead!"

"Smart talkin', Tejanmer," came from the crowd. "Ringy, eh? Morg Pawley and we-all will nail you sheep-hookin' homesteaders' hides to the fence for this! We'll burn you out and—"

Dal grinned coldly. "In Taxes we used to let the scrawny range horses live and make chicken feed out of four-flushers like you," he told them.

He, Lisa and Red Parker were easing their horses back, step by step. Dal Kinney must have known the spell over these men couldn't last forever. He was stalling, giving Lisa a chance to get farther away.

Then, in unison, the three riders whirled, streaked down the main street past the saloon. Behind them guns blared. Angry shouts came from Pawley's men who suddenly realized they had been held at bay by a glinting-eyed, grinning Texas youth—and a slim girl's hot words.

Bent low, Lisa and the two men heard the snarling whine of lead about them. Dust geysered about their broncs' chopping hoofs. Dal hipped about, flung shot after shot back at the howling mob to discourage pursuit. Red Parker, eyes shining with battle lust, let out a whoop. He thumbed back shots until his guns clicked empty.

They roared out of town, slicing through the brush on the trail to the east. Red Parker dropped behind, stuffing new shells past the loading gates of his guns. Dal swerved his lathered horse close to Lisa's.

"You don't believe my people—did this—to your father?" he yelled grimly.

"No, Dal!"

In the moon fog she glimpsed his hard-set jaw, his bleak eyes. He kept looking straight ahead.

"I've been a fool, Lisa," he grated, "to talk marryin' at this time! It has only brought more trouble to your shoulders. I'm gettin' to the bottom of this trouble. Until then, honey—"

"Until then, Dal," Lisa sobbed.

V

AT LAST the riders saw the winking yellow lights of the Dipper Bar ranch-house ahead through the night. Now that she was almost home Lisa dreaded seeing her father—with Dal.

Saddled horses, cinches tight and rifles scabbarded, stood with trailing reins beneath the cottonwood trees in the front yard. Sheriff Anton Machado's spotted pony was among them. So were a dozen or so prize horses of powerful cattlemen in the valley.

Men with twin gun-belts about their hips stood on the front porch. As Lisa reined in with Dal Kinney beside her those men ceased talking. Stiff with resentment, Lisa took Dal's arm, hurriedly guided him into the front room of the house.

Cowmen stood about, their grim-jawed faces hard as the rimrock, their bleak, unfriendly eyes lancing Lisa accusingly, then turning to Dal Kinney. They gave no greeting, or nod.

In one corner stood swart Sheriff Anton Machado, an assumed hurt look in his bloodshot eyes.

"Talk!" Lisa pleaded. "Where's Dad?"

"The back room, Lisa," Hoke Raydor, a cowman, said tonelessly. He shot a cold glance at Dal Kinney who stood at Lisa's side, tight-lipped, silent. "Don't expect he'll hanker to see one of the clan that shot him."

Lisa bit her lips to hold back scathing words. Turning, she ran out of the room, tightly clutching Dal's arm. Out in the long dark hallway of the rambling house she saw light come from a half-open bedroom door.

Lisa hurried toward it. From the bedroom filtered muted voices, the heavy smell of antiseptics. Gently Dal disengaged her clamped fingers.

"Lisa, maybe—"

"No, Dal," she whispered tremulously. "I want you to go with me. I need you."

They stepped into the room. Lisa saw Morg Pawley first. He stood at the foot of the bed. He stared at her, surprise flicking into his heavy-jowled face. Beside the bed she saw old Doc Gray. Then she saw her father. She thought she would never get across the room to the bedside. She paid no heed to Doc Gray's kindly warning.

"Dad!" Lisa whispered. "Dad!"

Her grief-stricken words seemed to linger in the deathly silence of the room. Lisa looked like a doomed person, kneeling there at the bedside. She looked so pitifully small. Upon her slumped shoulders would soon fall the burden of managing the Dipper Bar.

She brushed one trembling hand through her father's gray hair. Eyes closed, King Bradshaw lay like a dead man except for the slow rise and fall of his mighty chest.

"Dad!" Lisa barely whispered again.

King Bradshaw's eyes fluttered open. A tired smile fluttered across his bloodless lips.

"You married him, Lisa?" he asked huskily.

"Not yet, Dad. We were at Parson Rhodes' house when—when Red Parker brought us word."

"Dal Kinney is here now?"

Lisa nodded, her lips trembling.

"Fetch him here."

Lisa turned. She hadn't seen Doc Gray and Morg Pawley tiptoe from the room. Dal was standing in the doorway. When she called to him he came forward. Glad-

ness stirred some of the grief from her heart when she saw her father's eyes soften. King Bradshaw looked up at Dal. Lisa was proud of Dal. He knelt beside her, like a boy ready to be admonished.

THEN King Bradshaw's low words struck through the hush. Wise, simple words of an unbiased man who knows it is the end.

"I've learned a lot the past day or two. I—I'm sorry, Lisa, I never got to know you until it—was too late. Don't cry, honey. Bear up, like your mother would



Puzzlement

By PECOS PETE

These rangeland terms do puzzle me,

Sometimes they're mighty strange.

Now take Old Bill, he's eighty-four,

A "cowboy" on the range.

And now let's look at Young Jack Bright,

He owns a ranch at Breeze.

The kid is only sixteen now,

A "cowman," if you please!

of done. I admire your choice, honey. Dal, you got the earmarks of a man. You got a good jaw and steady-seein' eyes—" He hesitated, eyes closing momentarily. Lisa buried her head in her arms on the bed. "Sheep don't make the man," her father murmured sagely. "Nor do cows. A man is a man regardless. I've been blind, Dal Kinney. But it makes it easier, knowin' you'll be Lisa's husband and care for her. You love her, don't you, son?"

"More than anything else in the world, King Bradshaw," Dal whispered proudly.

"You've got a fight on your hands, son.

Unless you can convince the cowmen that it wasn't your people who killed Bill Fannin—and shot me—they'll rowel you to your grave."

"I know it, sir!" Dal said huskily, bitterly. "I know what's ahead. I see now how foolish I was when I thought Lisa and me could run from this trouble, get away from it. I don't mind tellin' you now that two of our men were bushwhacked the past week and sign of guilt pointed to the cowmen!"

"Dal!" cried Lisa, shaken. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"You've had enough trouble, Lisa, without saddlin' you with more," Dal told her. His jaw clamped with determination. "But I'm not goin' to quit till I stop this trouble. It's not my people doin' this killin'! It's not the cowmen. Both clans are blind. They're bein' goaded into this war by somebody with an ax to grind. I don't *sabe* what that ax is, but by the Almighty I'm findin' out!"

Fierce pride shone in King Bradshaw's pain-pinched eyes. "God bless you, son. Take care of—of Lisa—"

A coughing spell racked his frame. He never opened his eyes again after that. Only the tiny sputtering of a kerosene lamp nearby on a table, the muted sound of hushed voices from the front of the house disturbed the silence. Lisa sobbed softly. Still kneeling, Dal placed his arm about her.

They were like that when King Bradshaw died.

Numbed with despair, Lisa hardly remembered when Dal Kinney led her out into the hallway. Something died inside her with the passing of her father. It was like a wound that only time and the comforting closeness of Dal could heal.

Once in the hallway she tried to bridle her emotions. She had to think coolly now. The real test lay ahead. The test of meeting those cowmen in the front room, facing their searching stares with some semblance of her old defiance.

"Let's get it over with, Lisa," Dal breathed grimly.

He, too, knew what lay ahead. They walked through the hallway, side by side. Pale-faced and determined, they stepped into the front room. They stood there unflinchingly, facing the condemning stares of the cowmen.

Every powerful cattleman in the valley was present. Morg Pawley, flushed face beaded with perspiration, looked at Lisa, then at Dal, an unveiled sneer curling his lips.

Beside Pawley stood Sheriff Anton Machado, his bloodshot eyes darting furtively from face to face.

"Dad's—dead," Lisa said steadily.

This was a new and different Lisa Bradshaw to these men. She looked older. Grief had added to the beauty of her face. Instead of King Bradshaw's impetuous, hoydenish girl, here was a woman, radiating strength, courage and the stamina that had been her father's. There was a defiant tilt to her chin. Her eyes, red from weeping, looked straight at Hoke Raydor.

Leadership of the valley cowmen would go to Raydor now. He stirred uncomfortably.

"We're waitin' to hear your stand, Lisa," he said bluntly.

"Stand?" Lisa snapped.

Morg Pawley, affecting sympathy, took a step forward.

"You're a woman, Li—Miss Bradshaw. Maybe you don't understand the way us cowmen feel. Bill Fannin is dead. Now your father dies from bushwhacker's lead, triggered by some of the skunk clan that you're sidin' with—"

He got no further. Lisa screamed. Dal Kinney, nerves rubbed raw, leaped forward like a springing puma. His right fist started from the floor, smashing into Pawley's leering lips with the swift, sudden force of a driving piston.

PAWLEY reeled back into the arms of the cowmen, cursing, brushing blood from his lips. The other men, their raging emotions held in restraint too long, lunged toward Kinney who stood squared off to meet them. Yells, oaths filled the room. Then Lisa checked them, her voice rising above their ugly mutterings.

"Wait!"

"You wait, Lisa," Dal Kinney commanded gently. He turned to the enraged cowmen. He seemed to tower over those men who glared at him. "Skunk breed," he snarled savagely in their faces. "You listenin' to this pot-bellied town boss! Our men never killed Bill Fannin, and nobody

can say otherwise!"

"What proof ees there they deened't?" sneered Sheriff Machado.

"Proof?" fired Dal hotly. "You forget, star-toter, that a man is innocent till he's proved guilty. The only proof you got that King Bradshaw died from Texas lead is the word of Ace Rorison—a Pawley man the same as you! I'm the only Texan who has been off our land the past week. Maybe you cowmen don't know it, but two of our men have died the past week—and the sign pointed to the cowmen!"

"Talk's cheap, sheep-hook!" Pawley barked.

"Which same you seem to be full of, big-mouth! Seems to me you got a reason for stirrin' these men to war against my people. I don't know just why you're doin' it. But I aim to find out, and act accordin' with your own medicine—hot lead! All my people want is peace. But if you men go up there faunchin' for blood that's what you'll get. Me, I'll fight for them the same as I'll fight for Lisa!"

"Sure he'll fight for 'em!" roared Pawley. "No need stayin' here any longer, men. We know how the land lays. We know this clan killed Fannin and King Bradshaw! Them sheep-hookin' homesteaders is askin' for war. Let's give it to 'em! There will never be peace in the valley till we do."

"Shut up, Pawley!" thundered Hoke Raydor.

Pawley's blustering words died. Hoke Raydor turned to Lisa. She hadn't moved. She thought her knees were going to buckle beneath her.

"You agreein' with that man beside you, Lisa?" Raydor asked.

Hushed expectancy came over the room of tense-bodied, cold-eyed men. No one breathed. Lisa Bradshaw's face was as white as the snow that caps Mt. Baldy.

"Yes," she said firmly. "Don't look to me to join you. Dad died, believing you were all blind. I see war in your eyes. A war that will mean bloodshed, grief for women and children. I know those Texans are innocent. I hope to see the day when the man driving you blind fools into wholesale killing is tramped into the ground. Dal and I have a spread to look out for now. When trouble comes I'll fight beside Dal!"

Those men stalked from the room.

VI

QUIVERING now that the showdown was over, Lisa stood at Dal's side, watched the men depart. They left with sneers on their lips and contempt in their eyes. Men who had been bosom friends of King Bradshaw. Men goaded into a war because of their own blindness.

When the last of the hoofbeats had faded, Lisa turned at the sound of a voice in the doorway. Slim Hafferty, one of the Dipper Bar men, stood there.

"Reckon us boys will be leavin', ma'am," he said levelly. "We're stickin' with the cowmen."

That was the last blow. But Lisa stood up under it.

"Where's Stumpy, Slim? He's leaving, too?"

Hafferty told her he hadn't seen Stumpy Wells all evening.

Then he was gone. The pound of hoofs drifted into the night. The Dipper Bar ranchhouse became like a tomb. Outside in the night a gentle breeze whispered through the mesquite in the drought-stricken valley. It seemed to whisper of more deaths to come.

Unable to check her tears longer, Lisa fled into Dal's arms.

"I've only got you now, Dal. Just you!"

They were standing there when Tonca padded noiselessly into the room. In her unemotional way she told them she had made some coffee.

"Come dreenk," she said briefly.

They followed her into the kitchen. They drank the coffee Tonca poured for them. It had whisky in it.

The fluttery light from the kerosene lamp played over their faces. They didn't talk, for there was nothing to say. They kept thinking about King Bradshaw who lay dead.

Toward dawn, Lisa went to her bedroom. Dal stretched out on a sofa in the front room and Tonca disappeared in her room that adjoined the kitchen.

Lisa rolled and tossed, watching the first gray streaks of dawn crowd back the shadows in her room. Dry-eyed, bewildered, she kept telling herself that her father was dead and that war had come to Picacho Valley. A war that would mean the slaughter of Dal's people.

She finally did sleep fitfully. When she

awoke the hot morning sun was streaming into her room. From in back of the house at the tool shed she heard someone pounding and sawing boards. Dressing, she hurried to find Tonca.

"Eet ees *El Padre* Rhodes, Lisa," she said quietly. "The *Senor* Kinney ees weeth heem. You eat, *chiquita*. I feex."

Lisa fled into the front room. Eat! One bite of food would choke her. Evidently Parson Rhodes and Dal were building a coffin of rough pine boards. They would line it with a fleecy blanket. Each stroke of that hammer jarred Lisa as if the nails had been driven into her body.

The blinds in the front room were drawn. It was cool, gloomy in there between those four thick 'dobe walls. Lisa stood stiffly in the center of the room, arms hanging limply at her sides. She closed her eyes.

"You'd want me to do as I'm doing, Dad," she whispered softly. "Give me strength. Help me!"

It was as if King Bradshaw's spirit was in the room with her. And Lisa felt new strength flow into her body. Some of the awful burden seemed lifted from her shoulders.

Toward noon, Slim Hafferty and Red Parker rode up to the tool shed.

"Thought we might be of some help," they told Parson Rhodes and Dal. "King Bradshaw was mighty good to us boys." Lisa heard them from the kitchen door.

It was just past noon when she walked with the grim little procession to bury her father. She stood beside the open grave which the men had dug in the soft earth beneath the cottonwood trees King Bradshaw had loved.

In a dull way, Lisa listened to Parson Rhodes' droning words, the Bible gripped in his hand. No long-drawn eulogy did he give. Just brief, simple talk that cowfolks understand.

"The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."

On one side of the grave stood Slim Hafferty and Red Parker, bareheaded, their eyes on the ground at their feet.

Beside Lisa stood Dal. Next to him was Tonca, face expressionless as stone.

LISA didn't cry now. Her lips trembled. That was all. In the depths of her brown eyes was the haunted light of one

irreparable hurt.

She went back toward the house with Tonca before the dirt was thrown into the grave. It seemed an endless distance. She took step after step, watching her distorted shadow move out over the ground in front of her. She wanted to cry out against the bitter injustice of her lot. But she made no sound.

She had been in her lonely room about an hour when Tonca burst unceremoniously through the door. The old Yaqui woman's red eyes were wide with excitement.

"Come, *chiquita*!" she whispered tensely. "Tonca, she ees going to keel a man!"

Lisa raced into the front room, Tonca at her heels, breathing hard.

"Where's Dal, Tonca?"

THE Yaqui woman pointed to a note on a table. "He leaves," she panted. "He wrote thees."

With trembling fingers, Lisa unfolded the note. Dal's hurried pencil scribbling greeted her eyes.

Dear Lisa:

I'm leaving to ride into town. I've got to find out some things before tonight. The cowmen are meeting at Hoke Raydor's place after dark. I'll be back soon.

Dal.

Lisa's eyes raced over the words again. Then she remembered Tonca's threat. Tonca was strangely agitated. It was unusual for her to display excitement. Her eyes were like pools of fire.

"Now who did you say you were going to kill, Tonca?" Lisa asked quickly.

"A man, little one," Tonca declared.

"Who?"

Tonca's eyes rolled in their sockets. "Tonca see. Tonca hear. Tonca know now who do thees keeling. *Perro*! Son of the dogs! Eet was Senor Pawley—Anton Machado, the evil man. Me, I keel them. Senor Beel Fannin, he ees no' dead like you theenk."

"What? Talk, Tonca!"

Lisa clutched the old Yaqui woman's fat shoulders. Half in Spanish, half in English, the old woman related how a little Yaqui boy had ridden up to the ranch while Lisa was in her room, just after Dal Kinney had ridden toward Picacho town.

This Yaqui *muchacho*, Tonca said, was the son of a herder of goats off to the

south in the alkali flats. Two nights ago this boy and his father had come upon the wounded Bill Fannin. Fannin had crawled through the brush, half-dead, like a coyote with broken legs. The old Yaqui and his son had taken Fannin to their lonely shack. Bill Fannin was still alive.

That was all Tonca knew. The boy had told her this much, no more. Then he had ridden away.

Lisa knew of such a shack. It was at the southern tip of the valley where alkali flats spread to the toe of the mountains. Nothing could grow there. The cowmen had no use for the land. They had raised no complaint when an old Yaqui and his son had suddenly appeared on the spot with a few scraggy goats. They had built themselves a mud hut in this desolate spot and molested no one.

Lisa had heard the cowmen mention the place. They had shrugged, grinned. Gossip had got about that the Yaqui was loco and that his son played with the coyotes at night. Lisa recalled that Tonca was the only one who had spoken a good word for this strange pair. Lisa had even suspected Tonca of riding to visit them of nights. Yaquis hated Mexicans. They always found solace in the occasional companionship of their own people.

"Senor Beel Fannin, he steel ees alive," Tonca kept repeating.

Lisa was already running out of the house, calling to Tonca to follow. At the shed they saddled two horses, mounted. For all her bulk, Tonca rode well. Her braided black hair flew back in the wind as her horse broke into a hard lope at the heels of Lisa's pony.

Straight south they rode. The hot afternoon sun beat down on them. Lisa, in the lead, swerved her horse around sandy humps where mesquite clumps offered scant shade for coiled sidewinders. They then pounded past the bleached bones of cows that lay in the sand, mute reminders of the drought.

Lisa's wavy hair ruffled in the wind. Color came back into her cheeks. She puzzled over the startling news Tonca had told her. If Bill Fannin *was* alive out here at the goat herder's hut, he would likely be able to tell who had attempted to kill him two nights ago. Lisa's hope was that he would be able to exonerate the sheepmen. It was evident to her, too,

that whoever had shot Bill Fannin had also killed her father.

She didn't try to figure out the motive for these shootings. That the sheepmen were innocent she was positive. Was it Morg Pawley and his hired gunmen as Tonca so readily believed? For surely the Yaqui woman must have had more than her intuition to make her so emphatic.

Lisa knew Pawley was as crooked as a snake. But what would he have to gain in stirring up a war?

Stopping the cowmen from riding to war tonight was all that mattered to Lisa now. Nerves already on edge due to their beef losses, King Bradshaw's cold-blooded killing had fanned the flame of war. The cowmen, ordinarily rational, would ride like madmen tonight, their guns flaming.

Those sheepmen, Dal's people, back there in their cabins in the foothills wouldn't have a chance. They would be outnumbered three to one. The cowmen, like a wolf pack crazed by the smell of gunsmoke and blood, wouldn't stop until the cabins were hot ashes. Women and children would die with their men-folks. And leading the cowmen would be Morg Pawley!

Tonca had lashed her bronc up beside Lisa. The old Yaqui woman was clinging to the kak horn, pointing ahead.

They topped a rise. Ahead, it looked as if a mighty hand had sprinkled salt upon the baked ground. Sparse clumps of cactus and greasewood jutted from the baked earth. Only goats could exist in such a place. It was several acres across, hemmed in by buttes of sand and boulders.

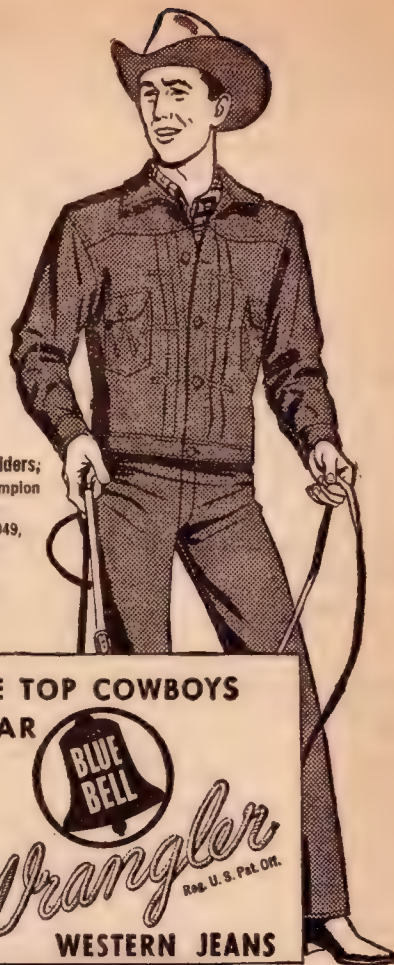
Across the flat, backed up to a sand hill, stood a one-room 'dobe hut. Close to the sagging, half-open plank door, a Yaqui boy was just alighting from a ribby dun pony. He looked up, frightened, at the two riders bearing down on him.

"Padre!" he shrilled. "Padre!"

Lisa saw the boy's lips move but his words were lost in the drum of hoofbeats. Lisa reined in. Tonca was already off her horse. The old goat herder, face like wrinkled leather, suddenly appeared in the doorway. Tonca was calling to him in the harsh, grunting Yaqui tongue.

Lisa dismounted, hurried to them. The old Yaqui bowed a greeting, still motioning with his hands and talking excitedly

[Turn page]



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to Tonca. As he stepped out of the doorway, Lisa ducked into the windowless hut.

She blinked, accustoming her eyes to the gloom. The smell of garlic, dried dirt, stung her nostrils. She saw Bill Fannin then. He was lying on a dirty blanket in one corner of the room upon the packed ground. There was a dirty rag about his head. He opened his eyes as Lisa called to him.

"Lisa," he answered her weakly.

She ran up to him, knelt down beside his pallet. His pain-dazed eyes shone with gladness. Beard stubbled his gaunt face. With a lot of effort he sat up, attempting a smile that was a grimace.

"I sent—the kid—to you—"

"Who did it, Bill?"

Bill Fannin's deep-socketed eyes flamed with hate. He took a breath. The name he spoke struck into the hush like a ghostly whisper.

"Ace Rorison!"

Stunned, Lisa didn't hear Tonca, the old Yaqui and his son step noiselessly into the shack. They stared down at her and the wounded man in awe.

VII

BILL FANNIN'S soft-spoken, vibrant words as he told his story were all Lisa heard. Night before last he had ridden from Morg Pawley's saloon in town toward the Dipper Bar to attend the meeting. Ace Rorison, Pawley's man, had insisted on accompanying him. Halfway to the ranch Rorison had suddenly thrown down on Fannin with his gun. The first shot caught Fannin in the right leg; the second in the chest.

That was the last Fannin remembered. Evidently Rorison had left him for dead. The Yaqui kid had found him, had brought him here to the hut, bandaged his wounds.

"That's about all I—remember, Lisa," Fannin added. "I guess I've been delirious. Today I come to and asked the kid to ride to your place. I didn't want Pawley or Ace Rorison to think I was still alive."

Lisa saw it all now. Briefly, she told Fannin of her father's death, and how the cowmen were going to war against the sheepmen.

"We've got to stop them, Lisa," Fannin muttered. "Pawley is fram'in'—these kill-in's. I—I got to get him!"

He bit his lips against the pain in his chest. One pants leg, cut off above the knee, showed the rag-bound wound in his leg. The Yaqui and his son had bandaged those wounds the best they could. They had washed the wounds with *sotol*, as Yaquis do. But Lisa realized Bill Fannin would have to have expert medical attention.

"Tell Hoke Raydor, Lisa!" he gasped through clenched teeth. "Got to stop—"

No man could long endure the excruciating pain Bill Fannin was bearing. His head slumped down, his eyes closing.

Lisa whirled, facing Tonca. Her voice crackled.

"You stay here, Tonca! Keep him alive! I've got to find Dal—get to Hoke Raydor!"

Halfway to the door she stopped. A man stood in the doorway, a gun in his fist.

"Sheriff Machado!" Lisa choked incredulously.

He just stood there, looking at her and at the three Yaquis who stood back in the corner of the gloomy hut close to the unconscious Bill Fannin.

"Sheriff!" Lisa cried desperately. "Bill Fannin is alive! I've got to get word to Hoke Raydor!"

Her rapid words stopped. Her eyes flew wide. She hadn't caught the significance of the gun in Machado's hand at first. Now it dawned on her—the startling, terrifying realization that Sheriff Machado was his true self now, a smirking, grinning beast. His evil face swirled giddily in front of her eyes. Then his purring words came to her as he shoved her back from the door.

"Beel Fannin mus' die, Mees Bradshaw. Dead people do no' talk."

Blind with fury, Lisa sprang at him like an enraged tigress, both her clenched fists beating savagely at his pockmarked face.

Abruptly Sheriff Machado's left fist shot out. His gun-filled right hand hardly moved. When the balled fist struck Lisa's lips it smacked suddenly. She fell back against the wall. But in a dazed way she knew she had to stop this half-breed sheriff from killing Bill Fannin.

Grinning crookedly, Machado stepped inside the shack. But beneath the brim of his black Stetson his blood-red eyes were mirthless. Whimpering like a hurt coyote, Tonca fled to Lisa's side, chattering and

crying in her native tongue, calling upon strange gods to curse this evil half-breed.

Lisa brushed Tonca away. Face an ashen mask, she rose to her feet. There was no fear in her eyes, only loathing. Trembling in every limb, she looked pitifully small, helpless. She lifted one hand, brushed away a trickle of blood from one corner of her mouth.

"You beast!" she flamed. "You killing beast!"

Sheriff Machado grinned. It made the pocked holes in his swart face deepen into wrinkles. Gun still leveled, he turned from Lisa to the old Yaqui goat herder and his son who stood like graven images.

"Me, I'm a killer!" he boasted to Lisa. "I weel keel them all but you, you she-cat! Tonight, *chiquita*, you an' me, we are riding down to the Border to my own countree. To hell weeth Morg Pawley."

Machado was drunk. Drunk on Morg Pawley's rot-gut whisky; drunk with his own sell-out plans. His words ran on and on. Mocking words that made Lisa's blood run cold. Outwardly she was cool, calm. But inside, she felt icy fingers of fear clutch at her heart. She felt deathly sick.

ESCAPE was out of the question now. Machado would shoot her down the same as he would shoot a man. Her throat felt dry. She wanted to cry out, but no sound left her parted lips. Then she heard herself saying:

"You killed my father, Machado! You killed-him!"

Machado lanced her with his eyes. Long a hireling of Pawley he had assumed many of the big *jefe's* ways. He tried to imitate Pawley. Whipped and cowed by the blustering saloonman for years, Machado's spirit was in revolt. Deep within him Machado was yellow. A rotten killer who knew no good.

"Not me, sweetheart," he sneered. "Me, I got too much sense. One of Pawley's men keel heem, not me. Ace Rorison shot to keel Beel Fannin. He mees. I search for the body an' then I found the tracks in the sand that come here. I fin' you."

"And Pawley had those two Texans killed!" Lisa cried furiously.

Machado laughed drunkenly. Swelling to his own importance, he told how Morg Pawley had planned those killings. Pawley had schemed to stir up a war that

would mean death to every sheepman, and ruin the cowmen. Pawley wanted that foothills land himself. He wanted to be kingpin of the entire valley. When he learned that the sheepmen had filed on that land he forced Sid Tipton, the weak-spined county clerk, to destroy those filings.

"Now Meester Pawley, he file on that land himself. He has hees men file. When the dumb cowmen keel off the sheepmen they weel fin' Pawley owns all that land. Eef they try to fight Pawley—*pmff*—he weel feenesh them."

Lisa understood now. Her mind raced madly for means of escape. There was none. Revulsion flamed into her dark eyes.

"You—yellow—cur!"

She realized the futility of words. Machado's red eyes smoldered. He tried to grin.

"Not a cur, *chiquita*," he gloated. "Me, I'm smart. I'm leaving. Me, I have money Pawley has paid me. To hell weeth heem now. Let heem go ahead weeth his butcher. You an' me, we're leaving—to-night!"

Tonight! If Lisa guessed right the cowmen wouldn't long delay their killing spree once darkness came. She thought of Dal. Her eyes closed.

"Dal!" she said silently. "Dal!"

Her words were a prayer. She tried not to think. She looked again at Machado. He was watching her, grinning, licking his lips. He sat down on the dirt floor near the door. Seconds ticked past. Endless seconds that seemed like an eternity.

No one moved. In the doorway on the floor, Machado drew his knees up in front of him. The gun still dangled from the bony brown fingers of his right hand. Glancing about the group, he produced a whisky bottle from the hip pocket of his denims and took a long swig.

"Set down," he ordered Lisa and Tonca.

They sat down, side by side, their backs to the mud wall. Across from them lay Bill Fannin, eyes closed. His chest rose and fell. His labored breathing was the only sound. Close to him stood the Yaquis, father and son, their hot eyes never leaving the sheriff's face.

An hour passed. It seemed an eternity to Lisa. It was hot inside the cabin. Steamingly hot. Somewhere near the door

a cricket chirped. Out through the open door she saw the shimmering heat waves dance off the white alkali flats.

Far off through a haze were the purplish peaks of the 'Lupes. Off yonder across the valley was her home. Home! The very thought brought a choke in her throat. Home, where she had sat under the lonely stars at night dreaming of a future with Dal.

Lisa shut out the tormenting thoughts. Machado stirred. She looked up. The half-breed lawman was moving toward the pallet where Bill Fannin lay. Machado stood over the immobile body of the cowman, a strange glint of satisfaction in his eyes. He kicked Fannin in the ribs. There was no responding groan.

Lisa felt her heart stop. Her anguished cry sliced out through the silence.

"He's dead! He's dead!" Her fearful echoed in the shack.

Machado turned around and went back to the door. He sat down and took another drink.

"I won't have to keel heem," he said.

Lisa hadn't noticed when Bill Fannin had stopped breathing. He had died without a sound. A clamminess stole over the girl. Her eyes, stark with horror, stared at the Mexican sheriff.

IF TONCA felt any emotion she didn't show it. Squatting on the floor beside Lisa, she made no move. Only her eyes showed life. She watched every tiny move Machado made, as a coiled snake watches its victim. Her fat brown hands remained folded in the lap of her black dress. Against the wall the old goat herder stood beside his son, watching, waiting, his face as inscrutable as whang.

Evening shadows stole across the doorway, deepening the gloom inside the hut. Finishing his bottle, Machado reeled to his feet. He stood for a moment on forked legs, the gun jutting from his fist. Contempt in his eyes, he turned to the goat herder and his son.

"Spawn of the whelp breed!" he snarled in Spanish. "Low-livered dogs—"

The two Yaquis must have known it was the end. The boy's thin face twitched. Terror leaped into his eyes. He started to cry out but his father's hand checked him. The old man looked disdainfully at Machado. The one word that left his lips

sounded like the hiss of a rattler.

"Perro!"

VIII

MACHADO'S gun roared twice. Lisa, eyes closed, throttled her stricken cry. Her ears roared. Acrid gunsmoke choked her. As in a hideous nightmare she heard the two bodies fall thumpingly to the floor. She heard the swishing sound of steel against leather as Machado slowly holstered his gun.

Whether she fainted then or not, Lisa would never know. Shuddering, she opened her eyes. Machado was sitting near the door again, watching her. Outside it was dark. There was a candle burning on a shelf against the wall near the door. Its feeble yellow rays fluttered across Machado's sweaty pockmarked face. His eyes burned feverishly. Tonca hadn't moved. Lisa didn't look toward the body of Bill Fannin, nor toward the two crumpled bodies that lay sprawled upon the floor near him.

Lisa knew it was the end. Her silent, fervent prayer now was that death would come before—

"Eet ees night now, Lisa," Machado purred tonelessly. "You been asleep. We mus' go."

Lisa's heart pounded in her throat. She watched Machado pull himself to his feet. Then she spoke, her voice sounding far-off, prophetic.

"You'll die for this!" she murmured. "You'll scream for your yellow soul."

Her ghostly words hung in the air like a slowly tossed lass'-rope. She watched Machado start toward her, grinning. His grotesque shadow moved over the barren mud walls and roof. When he got up to her his lips spread back over his teeth, like wolf fangs.

"Come, *chiquita*," he whispered.

Tonca's uplifted eyes clung to Machado's face. Suddenly cursing, Machado clutched Lisa's shoulder, jerked her to her feet, tearing her white shirt.

Machado's touching her seemed to jar her free from the nerve-tingling horror that had paralyzed her. She came up fighting. Fighting with all her woman's fury. She clawed at the evil face that kept coming closer.

"Dal!" she screamed. "Tonca!"

Frenziedly she fought. Machado's sweaty hands fumbled for her throat. One hand clamped over her mouth. She was choking, strangling, the stench of Machado's whisky-laden breath in her nostrils. Wildly she struggled for the gun holstered at his hip. She felt her strength wane. The room swirled about her.

Then through a blur she glimpsed Tonca at Machado's back. She had a knife in her hand. The blade flashed down. Lisa felt Machado's body shudder. He recoiled, leaping back into the center of the room. His stricken cry filled the night. Against the far wall crouched Tonca, a thin-bladed *punal* gripped in one fat hand.

A surprised look of horror flicked over Machado's pockmarked face. He flung his hands into the air.

"You keel me!" he shrieked. "You fat—"

His hand streaked gunward. A shadow fell across the door. Two guns crashed as one. Machado's knees buckled, his triggered shot going into the dirt at his feet.

It all seemed hideous, unreal to Lisa. Dal was standing in the doorway, a smok-

ing six-gun in one hand. Then she was rushing to him, crying his name, sobbing. His whispered words in her ear seemed to give her new strength.

"Steady, little pardner!" he said. "Steady!"

They hurried outside the shack. Lisa breathed deeply of the clean night air. It cleared her head. Dal was telling her that they would ride to the Dipper Bar. He helped her mount. They rode stirrup to stirrup across the alkali flat toward the ranch, while at their heels rode Tonca, her face as emotionless as wrinkled saddle leather.

At the ranch, while Tonca prepared some nourishing food, Lisa related all that had happened to her since Dal had ridden away that afternoon.

Dal finally cut her short. "Just as soon as you eat you're goin' to bed, Lisa," he told her gently. "You didn't sleep last night. You're dead tired."

Lisa was tired. But even so she knew she would not be able to sleep. Not yet. "Sleep?" she cried miserably. "Why,

[Turn page]



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Dal, I'll never be able to sleep knowing—" Her voice broke from the strain. She got a grip on herself. "No, Dal. We know now that Pawley is crooked. We've got to get word to Hoke Raydor and the men, make them listen to reason!"

DAL rose to his feet, jaw muscles bunching. He looked older some way. Older and leaner and harder. He had been trying to hide his worry from Lisa—and failing. Trying to keep from her certain facts that were plaguing him. For the first time since Lisa had known him he had a gun strapped about his lean hips. A gun, Lisa guessed, that he had borrowed in town.

"I've had a hunch all along Morg Pawley was behind this trouble," he said quickly. "I rode into town to get the proof, but I didn't. But try and make Hoke Raydor and the other cowmen believe what we know! Pawley's got 'em all drunk, yellin' their heads off for war. They are meetin' at Raydor's ranch to-night, then ridin' on their killin' spree." His voice was bitter, hopeless. "I managed to get into town unnoticed. I tried to find Sid Tipton but he had disappeared."

Sid Tipton was the weak spot in Pawley's brazen scheme, said Dal. If Tipton could be hauled up before the cowmen, made to talk, it would change things.

Dal had tried to run down the whimpering little county clerk. He had planned to choke a confession out of him of Pawley's guilt, ride with him to the Raydor ranch tonight and make him tell the cowmen the truth in Pawley's presence.

Failing to locate Tipton in town, Dal had ridden with a friend toward his father's cabin in the foothills to warn his people that the cowmen were coming to wipe them out. Passing the alkali flats they had heard two shots. Dal had sent the friend on to warn his father. He had headed toward the shepherd's hut to investigate.

"That's about all, honey," he muttered tightly. "Let's eat."

Neither of them were hungry, but they tried to eat. Lack of sleep and food was telling on Lisa. Haunting memories of all she had been through showed in her eyes. She didn't want Dal to know she was worn out, weak-kneed and trembly. He

would insist that she go to bed immediately.

She kept telling herself: "The cowmen are drunk! They won't listen to reason. They won't believe me when I tell them all I know. They'll think I'm doing it to save Dal's people. But I've got to stop them. I've got to!"

Her mind raced, formulating a plan. A desperate plan that Dal must never suspect. He would try to stop her. She watched him rise, stride into the front room for his hat. She leaped to her feet, ran after him.

"Dal!" she called. "Wait!"

He stopped at the front door. She started at the look in his eyes—hard eyes, the eyes of a man who will ride through hell. Sheepman or cowman, Dal Kinney was a man!

Down in Texas he had been in the cow business with his father. A quiet, lean-muscled "hoss-and-rope-man" who could whip three like Morg Pawley. Up here in the Guadalupe, Dal Kinney and the other Texans had turned to sheep simply because of lack of funds to go into the cow business. In doing so they had stirred the ire of the valley cowmen.

"Dal!" Lisa cried desperately. "Ride to the foothills! Go to your people and fight for them! It's not my people you are fighting now. It's a pack of blood-crazed wolves!"

Hot tears flooded her eyes. They would call her a traitor, those cowmen. That was what they were already calling her—a woman Judas, turning against her own clan, the clan of her father. In years to come valley folks would point to her with fingers of scorn. Disgraced, she would be forced to leave her valley forever.

"You're all I've got, Dal. You and Tonca. Our dreams are shattered. We've been foolish thinking we could escape this. You can't run from a thing, Dal. You've got to face it. We'll never be able to—to marry now. Nothing matters but saving the lives of those innocent people up yonder in the foothills. Ride, Dal! Ride to your people and fight."

She stood sobbing in Dal's arms. Then his voice came to her, the strange, misery-choked voice of a strong man torn with conflicting emotions.

"The end," he whispered. "Maybe not, honey."

His voice belied his spoken hope. He stooped, kissed her. Then he was gone.

The sound of his horse's frantic hoofbeats faded into the night. Lisa leaned back in the doorway, her wide, tear-filled eyes staring, like a woman who has suddenly been robbed of everything worthwhile in life. Tonca came up behind her.

"Go to bed, *chiquita*," Tonca said softly.

Lisa fled to her bedroom. She wouldn't confide in Tonca. She would wait until Tonca had gone to her own room before she made her desperate move.

THIRTY minutes later, Lisa climbed quietly out of her bedroom window to the ground. Through the gloomy night she sped to the shed where Dal had stabled her pony. Saddling and bridling, she led the horse outside, leaped astride. Out of the ranchyard she roared, deaf to the pleas of Tonca who ran out of the house screaming at her.

Hoke Raydor's Lazy R spread lay adjoining the Dipper Bar, nearer Picacho. Lisa headed straight there. She leaned far over her pony's neck, breathing a prayer that she would be in time to intercept the cowmen before they rode for the foothills.

The miles sped past beneath her horse's flying hoofs. In the darkness she spotted the side road that wound around through the brush to the Lazy R ranchhouse. Then as she topped a slight rise, the lighted windows of the ranchhouse seemed to leap out of the night at her.

She pounded up into the yard, her heart leaping with hope. A tie-rack near the porch was lined with saddle horses. Cowmen's horses! There were buckboards in the yard, indicating that the cattlemen's meeting was still in session.

Lisa hit dirt running. The muted babble of voices came to her from inside the house as she bounded upon the porch. Those voices struck Lisa like an electric current, chilling her with apprehension. The cowmen weren't in that front room! They were the ranch women there!

Rushing into the room, Lisa closed the door behind her. She leaned back, her eyes flaying the room of starry-eyed women whose buzzing talk stopped with the abruptness of a desert thunderclap.

They stared at Lisa, the sewing baskets in their laps forgotten. Cowmen's wives. Women with worn faces and tired, wor-

ried eyes. Women with hands red and hard from toil, whose souls were tempered to the rigors and dangers of frontier life. They knew nothing else. They were kind-hearted women who listened to the dictates of their menflocks without a murmur of dissent. The fretful cries of their children came from an adjoining room, where they were bedded on pallets for the night.

"Lisa," Hoke Raydor's wife chirped uneasily, rising, "you're pale as a sheet, child. What's the matter?"

"Where are the menfolks, Mrs. Raydor?"

Lisa's voice didn't sound like that of King Bradshaw's pampered daughter. It held the defiant ring of her father when he had ruled the entire valley. Hoke Raydor's wife, half-frightened, glanced about her.

"Why, Lisa," she faltered, "they're holdin' a meetin' in town to decide—"

"To decide on death!" Lisa bit out scornfully.

IX

THE deep irony of Lisa's words cut through the tense atmosphere like a knife. She liked these women. Pitied them. Because she was motherless they had often driven to the Dipper Bar on Sundays to mother her.

"The men have already decided what they're going to do, and you women know it!" she flung out. "They've decided on war—tonight! They're riding up to the sheepmen's cabins with their guns blazing. They'll burn and kill. Those sheepmen will all die tonight, women and children with them! Why? Because you women have sat around with your sewing baskets in your laps while your menfolks let that snake Morg Pawley stir them to war! You women must have seen what blind fools your men have been!"

"Lisa—Lisa!" Mrs. Raydor cried, her face quivering. "You don't know what you're saying! Grief has come to us all and we—"

"What do *you* women know of grief?" Lisa cried bitterly. "Grief over your husband's cow losses maybe! I've lost my father in this trouble! Now I've lost the man I love!"

Another woman was on her feet, a

trembling finger of scorn directed at Lisa. Lisa knew her to be the brazen wife of a short-string rancher who had sided with Morg Pawley.

"Hussy!" she screamed indignantly. "You wearing men's britches and boots, disgracing our sex! You telling us what we should oughta do when you been courtin' one of them sheepmen that killed your own pa and Bill Fannin! Oh—"

She fell back into her chair as if fainting from shock. Lisa smiled her contempt. In the bewildered eyes of those confused women staring at her was anger, sympathy. They were divided about half and half.

It didn't matter to Lisa. Nothing mattered now.

"I'll be leaving, Mrs. Raydor," she said steadily. "Go on with your sewing—and may God have mercy on your souls!"

Lisa ran out into the night. She leaped into the kak and roared out of the yard.

Over the dark trail toward Picacho, Lisa put her horse to a killing pace. She was still a mile from the outskirts when an oncoming rider loomed up in front of her. She almost piled the rider before she could halt. Then she looked up—into the muzzle of a six-gun!

"Stumpy!" she cried. "You crazy?"

Gulping, Stumpy Wells sheathed his gun.

"Not crazy, Lisa," he snapped, relieved. "Just boogery. Hell's on the loose and it's every man for his own hide. I was ridin' to the ranch to tell you."

"I know, Stumpy. But where are the cowmen?"

"At Pawley's Ace High!" fumed the oldster. "Drunker'n hell and faunchin' for war. They're ridin' come midnight, and you might as well argue with wasp-stung steers."

Hurriedly Lisa related all that had happened. Stumpy Wells listened, his pale eyes blazing beneath shaggy brows.

"Sure," he fumed. "I figured Morg Pawley was a skunk all the time. But try and make them drunk fools believe you, Lisa."

Her chin jutted with determination.

"I'm ridin' to war with them, Stumpy!" she snapped. "Maybe I can do something to stop them!"

"Not all the boys has walked out on you, Lisa. We been doin' a little work on

our own hook today." Stumpy's eyes brightened with sudden resolve. "Sure you can do somethin', Lisa!" he barked. "By the leapin' fires of hell you and me will ride with 'em! Now listen."

Stumpy Wells talked fast, outlining his plan. For the first time in his life Stumpy Wells was talking and Lisa was listening. And Lisa, condemning herself for ever doubting this oldster's loyalty, understood now where he and some of the Dipper Bar boys had been the past twenty-four hours—and why!

"So the point is to lead 'em up Box Canyon, Lisa," rapped Wells. "I was just hopin' that's the way they'd ride up till now. Get Morg Pawley and his cutthroats to lead the charge. You drop back. I'll try to keep the cowmen in the rear. Box Canyon comes right out on the mesa flat, two hundred yards from Kinney's cabin where the Texans are holed up."

"Then you met Hook Kinney? Dal's father?"

"Met him," Stumpy Wells said gruffly. "And he's one of the finest gents I ever seen, too! He knows Morg Pawley and wants no part of him. As for the cowmen, he'll agree to anything that's fair and reasonable. No time to talk now! Let's ride!"

Their horses surged forward, sweeping down the trail toward town.

"And Dal," cried Lisa. "Did you—"

"Didn't see hair nor hide of him!" Stumpy Wells yelled.

LISA felt the numbing chill of premonition. Stumpy, who had left Kinney's cabin only an hour ago, said Dal hadn't been with the Texans. Lisa had taken it for granted he had headed for the Kinney cabin. With Pawley's hired gunmen stalking the range, anything could have happened to Dal!

Lights of Picacho town twinkled down the trail like stars that had fallen into the brush from the black heavens. Most of the lights were down in the center of town. The outlying homes were mostly dark. Those townspeople must have known hell was going to pop. They had blown out their kerosene lamps and gone to bed.

As they hammered past those houses, Lisa saw frightened faces appear at the darkened windows. Just ahead Morg

Pawley's Ace High Saloon was ablaze with light. Saddled horses lined the hitchpole, cowmen's horses, standing in the yellow rays of light.

At the batwing doors, Lisa and Stumpy Wells reined in. Lisa tensed, hearing the lionlike growl of angry voices. High above the others, wrathful and loud, rocketed Pawley's blaring words.

"That's the last straw, gents! Only today I rode up there and tried to point out to Hook Kinney his only out was to sell or hightail! He'd listen to neither. He's achin' to fight! Now with Fannin and King Bradshaw killed, and this comin' up, me'n my men are ready to ride. Let's stomp 'em out once and for all and rid the valley of sheep smell and skunk fumes. I—"

Lisa banged through the batwing doors.

"You what, Mr. Pawley?"

Sharp and clear her lashing words rose above Pawley's bellowing. The blast of a shotgun could not have silenced the room more quickly. Pawley whirled as if stabbed in the back. He had been facing the long line of drunken cowmen at the bar.

Big, massive-shouldered Morg Pawley with the milky, close-set eyes stared, thunderstruck! And those cowmen saw more than just the trim, defiant figure of Lisa Bradshaw standing inside the doors in her cowboy boots and faded denims. They saw the ghost of fighting King Bradshaw.

Pawley was the first to find his voice. His face purpled. He wasn't blind to the grip Lisa Bradshaw's sudden presence had upon these men.

"What you doin' here, gal?" he roared. "What you want? We're ridin' to war again the people that killed your pa!"

"That's why I'm here, Pawley!" she said in a firm voice. "I'm ridin' with you!"

Pawley looked as if he had been slapped in the face. His twitching eyes darted to his sneaking-eyed gunmen who lined one wall. Hoke Raydor reeled out from the bar to face the girl.

"You don't understand, Lisa," he rumbled gently. "You belong out to my place with the womenfolks."

Lisa laughed, scornfully. "Out with your womenfolks!" she cried tremulously. "You want me out there with those women who raise your kids and cook your

meals and say nothing. You want me out there with them so I can't see you kill innocent people! Oh, you blind drunken fools!"

Her words stung like the lashes of a whip. And those cowmen took it. They didn't know what else to do. They looked to Pawley. He was yelling his head off trying to drown out Lisa's tirade.

"You don't understand, you—you wild-cat!" he thundered hoarsely. "Them Texans just fired Hunt Borland's barns and left a note warnin' us that we'd get a dose of the same medicine if we didn't share our dried-up pastures with 'em!"

"That's a lie, Morg Pawley!" Lisa blazed fiercely. "Those Texans don't want our pasture. They've got plenty of their own!"

Pawley was clever. Subtly he had injected the insidious venom of war into the minds of these once rational men, covering his own snake tracks. Pawley's men had fired Borland's barns! Lisa knew it.

Fighting against frustration, Pawley sneered: "And what about Dal Kinney? Where does *he* come into this?"

"I don't know where he is! I don't know! All I know is I'm ridin' with these men."

"And how do we know you won't lead us into a trap?" snarled Pawley. "S'posin'—"

"S'posin', hell, Pawley!" Hoke Raydor bellowed. "This is no time to argue, damn it! King Bradshaw couldn't budge this girl once she had her mind set to a thing. How the hell can you? I say if she's fool enough to face them sheepmen's bullets let her ride!"

Harsh roars of approval greeted his pronouncement.

"Maybe she's got a reason for wantin' to shoot herself a sheepman!" yelled one of Pawley's men.

Lisa flushed. But there was nothing she could do about it. Like a mighty tide the men swept toward her. Turning, she ran outside, the howling mob at her back. Cursing, yelling, war-crazed men. Pawley, bellowing for order, might as well have been trying to make himself heard above a terrific desert storm.

IN FRONT of the saloon gray dust, churned beneath the hoofs of plunging, rearing horses, rose into the night. Mount-

ing, Lisa wheeled about. Stumpy Wells, trying to tell her something, was at her side. She would never know that he had stood in the darkness just outside the batwing doors while she was inside. He had been there, listening, waiting, his two guns in his fists.

Out of the chaos rose Pawley's voice.

"Where's Sid Tipton? Said he'd be here. Where's Sheriff Machado?"

"To hell with Tipton and our cussed sheriff!" barked Hoke Raydor. "They can't shoot."

"We need every man we can get, that's all."

"Lisa! Lisa!"

"Here, Hoke."

She spurred forward through the dust, past crowding horses whose swearing riders tugged at the reins. She choked, coughed. Hoke Raydor was at the head of the cavalcade, searching for her.

"Ride beside me, Lisa," he commanded sternly. "If you're crazy enough to want to do this, reckon I'll have to ride herd on you."

His words were lost in a new uproar.

"Sid!" shrilled Pawley frantically. "Sid Tipton! Machado!"

"Let's ride!" Hoke Raydor's deep-chested command rolled down that building-flanked street like a clap of thunder.

Four abreast, twenty-five grim-lipped, hard-eyed riders roared down the dark road, heading toward the foothills. Twenty-five men, cowmen and gunmen, riding hellbent to kill. Men with guns at their hips, rifles on their saddles and hate in their hearts.

In the lead rode Stumpy Wells, Hoke Raydor, big Strib Wines and a girl whose face was white as death. Lisa Bradshaw, the last of the Bradshaws, and she was asking God to help her.

X

RIDING at a hard lope, the cavalcade sped out across the gloom-spawned valley. No man said a word. Over the cooling sands, across the malpais and burnt grama-grass where the water-holes had dried to boggy soap-holes.

These men had seen their cattle die by the score for lack of water and pasture. For endless drought-stricken days they had waited for the inevitable ruin that

faced them. Often they had gazed up at the cool peaks of the 'Lupes and thought of the pasture and water up there, enough to sustain every cowman in the valley through the drought.

But that land was homesteaded. Sheep land. Pawley, the only man who claimed to have talked to the Texans, had despondently said the sheepmen wouldn't listen to sharing their bountiful pasture and water. The cowmen believed Pawley. They did not especially like his blustering way. But he had lost beefs along with the others.

Then came the startling news from Sid Tipton that those Texans hadn't filed legal claims on that land. They had just jumped it, he said.

Bill Fannin had been bushwhacked. The sign pointed to the sheepmen. Pawley thundered that the sheepmen were trying to run the cowmen out of the valley, to increase their holdings. Then King Bradshaw, kingpin of the cowmen, had been killed. Sheepmen, said Pawley.

Tonight, news had come of Hunt Borland's barns burning, and of the note found beneath the door of Borland's ranchhouse. A note of warning, signed by a sheepman. That was the spark that ignited the powder keg.

Lisa brushed one hand across her eyes as if to sweep aside her maddened thoughts. The mighty drumming of hoofbeats filled her ears. The night wind whipped her feverish cheeks. She tried not to think of Dal.

Weak, exhausted, she thought the miles would never pass. She felt the worried glances of Stumpy Wells and Hoke Raydor who rode on either side of her. At her back she felt the driving force of Morg Pawley's slitted gray eyes. She could imagine his eyes boring into her very soul, prying into the secret plan she had with Stumpy Wells.

Ahead loomed the foothills. Back of them towered the serrated peaks of the 'Lupes, ominous and foreboding. As if mocking the cowmen, the faint breeze was laden with the fragrance of grass and pine—and sheep!

At a fork in the trail, Hoke Raydor raised his right hand for a halt.

"The right trail fetches us in back of Hook Kinney's place," he announced

grimly. "The left trail comes right up to his front door through Box Canyon. I say we take the Box Canyon trail and have it out with 'em face to face."

"Take the other and come up from behind 'em," Morg Pawley blatted belligerently.

"Too yellow to face them, Pawley?" asked Lisa. She was startled at the calmness of her own voice.

Pawley choked on his rage. Cursing, Hoke Raydor took the left trail, up through Box Canyon. Lisa's heart leaped into her throat.

"Wait, Hoke!" she cried.

She pulled up beside him. There was a lot she wanted to tell him. Stumpy Wells clutched her arm.

They rode at a trot, the men's hands dropping to their scabbarded rifles. They knew death lay ahead for some of them. But it would take bloodshed to right the wrongs done them.

The trail wound higher and higher through night-blackened lanes, between scrub oaks and stunted pines. Hoofs clicked against stones. Men muffled their curses. The canyon narrowed between sheer walls that gradually tapered as they neared the mesa.

Then ahead Lisa glimpsed the Kinney cabin back in the pines. No light shone at the windows. There were no signs of life.

Yet Lisa knew that behind those log walls were men and women and children. The men would have guns to their shoulders, peering out through loop-holes. The children would be whimpering softly. And the women would be praying.

Three hundred yards from the cabin, Hoke Raydor again called a halt. He had a six-gun in one fist now. He squinted through the darkness toward the cabin. Only the heavy breathing of the horses broke the hush. Lisa felt terror strike through her. Her throat felt tight, dry. She felt the tension that gripped the men about her.

Guns swished, leaving leather.

"Kinney!" bawled Hoke Raydor. His voice rolled up through the canyon. "Hook Kinney! I'm warnin' you. We're cleanin' the foothills tonight of you back-shootin', sheep-smellin' tribe. If you've got women-folks in there send 'em out, pronto. We're comin' a-killin'!"

HOKE RAYDOR'S words were still echoing as the cabin door opened. Out into the gloomy, silent night stepped a tall, broad-shouldered man. He stood as stalwart and straight as the pine trees about him.

"Our womenfolks ain't in the habit of runnin' when they's a fight, mister!" his voice trumpeted. "Our women fight with us. We don't want war, but now that you've fetched it to us, we'll fight for what's ours."

"What's yours?" bellowed Hoke Raydor indignantly.

"Ours!" Hook Kinney answered him. "We've filed on this land and we aim to keep it. Only yesterday we told your spokesman we'd share it with you cowmen if you was pushed for feed and water. He told me to go to hell!"

"That's a lie, Hook Kinney!" cut in Pawley.

"To hell with arguin'!" fumed Hunt Borland. "We come up here to fight and settle this thing. They fired my barns, killed King Bradshaw and Bill Fannin. We know that!"

"Not a gun has been triggered!"-shouted Hook Kinney. "We—"

Lisa's piercing scream rocketed above the mutterings. She struck out at Morg Pawley's gun-filled hand just as he fired. Too late! Hook Kinney fell to the ground.

Then hell broke loose! Gun thunder rolled through the canyon. Streaking, pencil-like rifle flames spurted from loop-holes in the cabin. Horses squealed.

Rising high in the stirrups, Pawley shrilled a frenzied order to charge. Hoke Raydor cursed like a madman, telling the men to dismount. Stumpy Wells was bawling something to the cowmen.

"Hoke!" screamed Lisa hysterically. "Don't ride forward!"

A dozen riders, bent low over their horses' necks, were already roaring ahead. Guns in their hands flamed hot lead. In the lead rode Pawley. Pawley might have been a lot of things, but he was not a coward. Into the face of the withering gunfire from the cabin he charged, a dozen of his men behind him.

Lead whined through the brush about Lisa. Spurred by the belief that Pawley was fighting their battle for them, Hoke Raydor started forward, yelling to the cowmen on foot to follow. Lisa clutched

his arm, shouted in his ear.

"Don't, Hoke! There's—"

Pawley's frenzied howl stopped her.

"Hell! Barb wire!"

Horses squealed as they charged into the wire, then careened, "spilling their riders. Pawley's hired killers were tumbled into a maze of barbed wire. Cursing like men berserk, they wilted under the gunfire from the cabin.

"She done this!" mouthed Pawley. "Lisa Bradshaw had this wire stretched. I—I knew she was trappin' us! Get the cowmen, boys! They're back there with her. To hell with the sheepmen now. Kill them cowmen!"

Like a cornered rat, Pawley was fighting for his life. Ignoring the shooting from the cabin, he turned his men about, charged down through the darkness toward the bewildered cowmen.

"Pawley!" roared Hoke Raydor. "You loco?"

"No, you damned thick-head!" shrilled Pawley. "Just killin' you oxes a little sooner than I figured on doin'!"

Paralyzed, Lisa saw Hoke Raydor go down from the hail of lead that came from Pawley and his charging men. Screams of the wounded filled the night, rising high above the din of crashing guns. Most of the cowmen stood like statues, dropping like tenpins. Others triggered frantically from the brush.

Lisa felt hot lead burn her side. She fell from her rearing horse. Flat on the ground she flopped beside the inert body of Hoke Raydor. The black night swirled crazily in front of her eyes. Running figures. Men gone mad.

Hoke Raydor's face was close to hers. He had a bullet-hole through the middle of his forehead. Then she saw the six-gun in his outflung arm.

Dazedly she reached for it. Like an ugly image, big Morg Pawley reared up out of the gloom just in front of her. He came forward, like a huge grizzly, leaping over the bodies of the cowmen on the ground. He saw Lisa. The gun in his hand lifted.

Lisa raised her own gun. Painfully slow. Her arm felt like lead. It was hard to see. Pawley was but a dim outline against the deeper black of night now. She hardly knew when the gun bucked in her hand.

Pawley, his face a horrible mask, reeled

forward, hands reaching out to where Lisa lay. Then he shuddered, stiffened to the impact of lead from the gun of a horseman who rocketed out of the night straight toward Lisa. It was Dal Kinney, gun in one hand, hugging the screaming Sid Tipton in the saddle in front of him.

"Dal!" Lisa thought she was calling.

She remembered Pawley falling. In a hazy way she knew Dal was calling to her, lifting her in his arms. And then complete darkness engulfed her. . . .

LISA BRADSHAW awoke the next morning to find sunlight streaming into her room. Outside birds chirped in the cottonwood trees. The sound of voices filtered into the room. Men's voices and women's. The carefree, high-pitched voices of children came from the yard.

Lisa thought she was dreaming. She was even more positive of it when she turned her head and saw Dal Kinney, Tonca and Doc Gray in the room with her.

"What are you all doing here?" she demanded.

Dal Kinney came forward. Doc Gray left the room, softly closing the door at his back. Dal sat down on the edge of the bed. He took Lisa's hand in his. And at the foot of the bed Tonca sat in a straight-backed chair, watching them, her wrinkled bronzed face inscrutable, but her eyes soft with relief.

"We're lookin' after you, Lisa," said Dal.

"I'm all right."

"Sure, honey." He grinned wanly. "Just a little tired maybe from tryin' to fight a man's war by yourself."

All that had happened the night before came to Lisa in a rushing torrent. Questions crowded through her mind. Things she wanted to know and hesitated about asking. She waited a moment, then said:

"What all happened, Dal?"

Dal started to speak, then checked himself. From out on the porch Stumpy Wells' gruff words reached them.

"Listen to him, honey," Dal whispered, "and you'll get the whole story. Stumpy is out there with some of our folks."

"Your folks?" Lisa murmured, startled.

Dal nodded, grinning.

"See, me and some of the Dipper Bar boys stretched that there wire," Stumpy Wells was explaining. "We knowed it'd

stop Pawley. But we hadn't figured on him turnin' his guns on us. Well, sir, him and his men started back toward us shootin' 'fore we could get our wits together. Lisa, she fell to the ground beside Raydor. Me, I lost my gun. But I was stumblin' toward her, yellin' my head off.

"Pawley lifts his gun to shoot her when she raises up and fires. Pawley keeps a-comin', when up rides Dal. He had that spindly-necked little crook of a Sid Tipton hangin' to the kak in front of him. But old Dal, he was a-shootin'. He was the one that finally downed Pawley. See, Dal had been in town huntin' Tipton to make him confess to the cowmen that Pawley was a skunk. He didn't find him till after the cowmen left town. Found the little yellin'-belly hid in the cellar of his house."

"Heard enough, Lisa?" Dal asked.

"Enough, Dal," she said weakly.

"Peace has come to valley, Lisa," he said quietly. "My folks and yours are out there now talkin' the thing over, makin' plans for the future. Machado is dead. So is Morg Pawley and most of his men. Sid Tipton is in jail. He's confessed to everything. Dad is out at the place with two holes in him, but he'll live. We've got to forget last night, honey. It took blood-

shed to break Pawley's power and bring folks back to their senses. But it's over now."

They fell silent, harkening to the sounds of the men and children out on the porch and in the yard. Harkening to the muffled voices of Texans' wives and cowmen's wives mingling in the front room. Women who were forgetting their grief and welcoming peace.

Then Lisa heard the low mutter of thunder. It rolled over the sun-scorched valley as if it had been awaiting this day of new understanding. It grew louder and louder. The sultry heat grew more oppressive.

Rain clouds began dimming the sun. In another hour it would be raining—the drought broken.

Sheer joy surged through Lisa. The glorious promise of what lay ahead—with Dal—overshadowed her grief. She closed her eyes against the unshed tears. Dal leaned toward her. She thrilled to his closeness, and to his whispered words as he kissed her.

"Lisa," he said softly, "Parson Rhodes is out here. He says his job is only half finished."

"It is, Dal," she said. "Tell him to wait. I'll dress and be right out."



Next Issue's FIVE Featured Novels

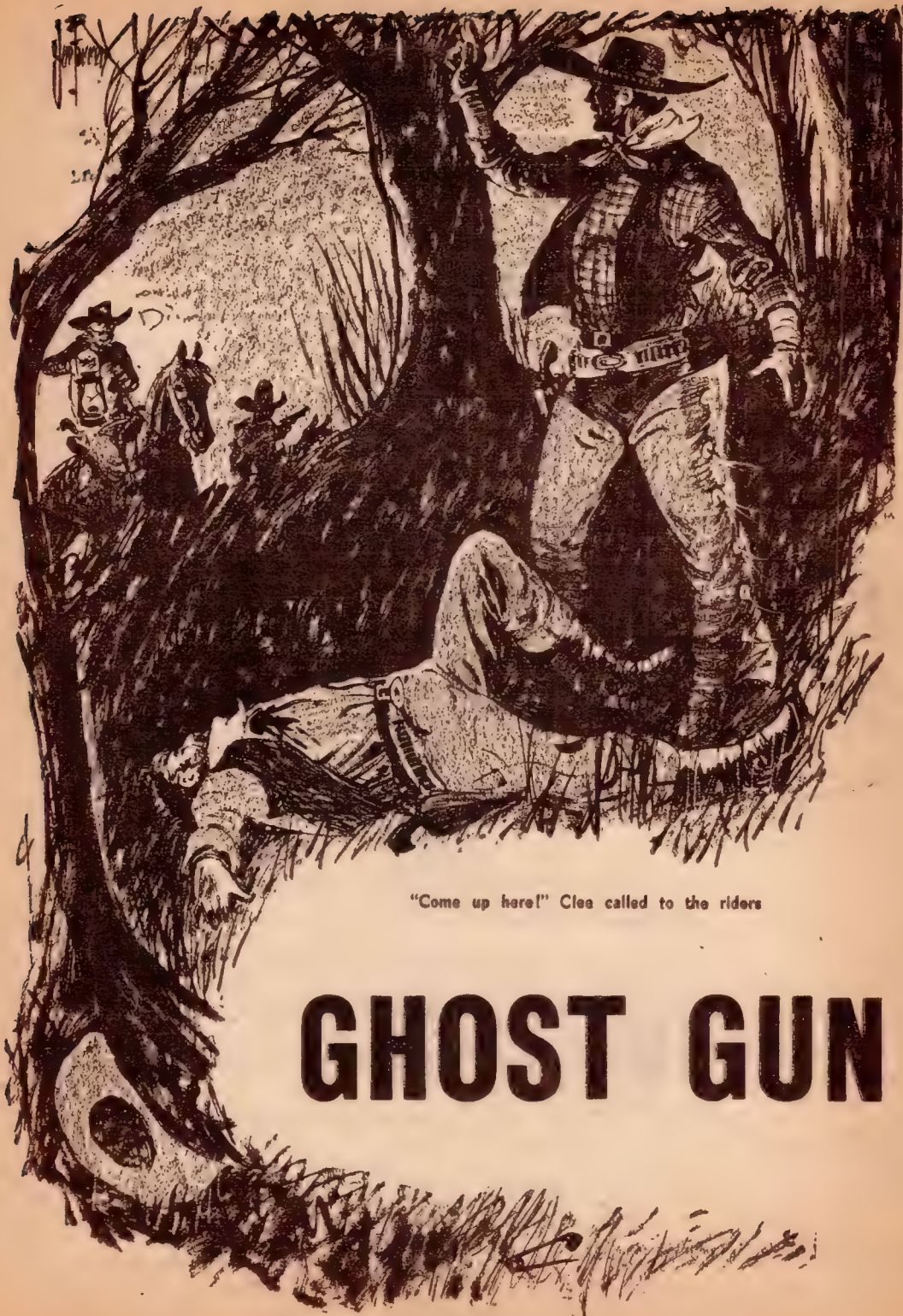
SHOWDOWN ON SQUAW CREEK by RAY GAULDEN

GUNS OF FORT PERILOUS by SAMUEL MINES

PAWNS OF JEOPARDY by HERBERT A. WOODBURY

DON'T SLIP YOUR HOBBLER by FRANK MORRIS

VOICE OF THE WILDERNESS by SYL MacDOWELL



"Come up here!" Clea called to the riders

GHOST GUN



A Novel by JOE ARCHIBALD

I

RANCHER CLEE BISHOP paused just inside the door of "Tonto Bill's" place and let its crazy roar of sound strike against him. His ears picked up a familiar laugh, a high-pitched long-drawn out laugh and he knew "Long John" Kelso, his partner at the Drag 7, was in the place.

Bishop slammed a half-smoked cigar to the floor and strode to the bar.

"How long's Kelso been in the back room?" he asked.

"He brought himself in two hours ago,

Clee. And he brought his luck with him this time. You don't have to worry none."

Bishop took a quick drink, passed his sleeve over his mouth and turned and went into the smoke-filled room at the rear of the big frame building. Seven men sat at a big round table, their faces a picture of woe-begone misery—all except Long John, who wore a beatific smile.

Long John swung around when he saw Clee.

"My night to howl, feller," he roared as

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SHOWDOWN

Al Spain always went unarmed—but that didn't keep

Clee Bishop from recognizing his deadly crookedness!

Shrouded in Mystery Are the Men Behind the

he stabbed a finger at the stack of chips before him. "These jiggers have been cleanin' me for months and I kept tellin' 'em it was a long road that didn't have a crook in it."

"I ought to bend a gun over your thick head," Clee Bishop said. "You promised to quit this, Kelso."

"Tonight I quit," Long John grinned.

"Come lookin' for another man," Bishop growled. "I'll be ridin' back to the Drag Seven in about a half hour, John. Goin' to take a look around."

"Take your time," Kelso laughed. "I got me just a little bit of drinkin' to do."

Bishop went out. He stood on the planked walk and scanned the wide, rutted street with his sharp eyes. He noticed a buckskin horse standing just inside the wide door of the livery stable. The blacksmith was lifting one of its front feet.

Clee tossed away his cigarette and clogged across the street. In the patch of light stretching away from the stable entrance he stopped and called a name.

"Spain!"

A man with a thin, sneering face came out into the street. He had a pair of little eyes studding his vulpine face and mirroring a miserable little soul. One of the eyes was pulled down at the corner by an old knife scar.

He wore no gun—and yet he had many enemies, this man. These enemies were aware that the law could hang them if they shot down an unarmed citizen. Al Spain was aware of it too.

SPAIN had a small outfit near Ute Pass and there were men in the cattle strip who claimed that Spain's cows "had twins."

"Callin' me, Bishop?" Spain ground out.

"You were over at Stillwell's three hours ago, Spain," Bishop said, his jaw muscles tightening as he stepped forward. "You laid a hand on Stillwell's daughter. You knocked that poor witless son of Stillwell's down. I told you to keep away from those nesters, Spain!"

"You the Lord of this country, Bishop?" Al Spain said, smiling crookedly. "I was showin' a cheap nester's gal she couldn't play high and mighty with me. That crazy brother of hers come for me with his knife." Spain spat into the baked mud at Bishop's feet and grinned. "Maybe I'm tryin' to put a brand on your stock, Bishop?"

Clee Bishop caught Spain by the slack of his shirt and yanked him toward him.

His right fist slammed into Spain's mouth. Then he released his grip and let the man fall.

"Too bad there wa'n't a law passed makin' men carry guns," Bishop said. "You'd been dead five years now, you skunk."

Al Spain got to his feet wiping blood from his mouth. Bishop's hand dropped to his gun handle as he saw two punchers edge away from the walk.

He recognized the short barrel-bodied man as one of Spain's riders.

"I wouldn't try it," Bishop's voice boomed out. "You're right in the light, Shan. Come over and drag this carrion off the street."

"I'll see you some time, Bishop," Al Spain fired through broken lips, "when the picture's different." His eyes threw black hate at the Drag 7 rancher and then he swung toward his cronies. "You carry that gun to be fancy?" he growled at the squat man named "Shan."

"Don't blame him none," Bishop grinned. "He wasn't in the back of me, Spain, and hidin' behind a tree. I'm tellin' you for the last time. Keep away from Stillwell's."

"Some day them nesters'll go out," Spain said as a parting shot. "Them as cottons to 'em will find themselves draggin' their freight with 'em." He whirled into the stable and angrily grabbed at the buckskin's head.

Young Bishop stood in the doorway of the stable and watched the three Wet Moon riders leave Triangle City.

"He's a bad one, Clee," the hostler said. "Spain don't never bury a grudge."

Bishop nodded. He thought he knew the

Cowmen-Nester War Raging in Triangle City

thoughts that were milling in Al Spain's crooked brain even as the man rode out there in the dark. There was nothing Spain would not do if the price was right. He would serve any master.

The nesters had been out there near Owl Creek for over a year now, and had escaped being molested. But Clee Bishop had caught the hint of growing resentment in the big owner's run of talk.



HACK NETHERCOTT

Owner of The Hat

Scraps of conversation he had overheard in Triangle City had been pieced together and remembered.

Hack Nethercott, owner of The Hat, had said not more than a week ago, "They ain't so much trouble for us now but they can be worse when a lot more of 'em move in. Only way to stop cinch bugs from gobbling up the grass roots is to stomp on their larvae. Long as they don't 'slow elk' our beef or give us any other cause to crack down on 'em, I reckon we got to let 'em be."

There had been a grim reservation in Nethercott's words and Clee Bishop had

caught it quickly. He knew that Tunstall of the Flying V was only waiting for a chance, the slightest excuse, to wage war against the homesteaders.

A strong sheriff's office in Triangle City had thus far kept the tempers of the big owners within bounds but it would only require one small overt act on the part of the hoemen to set off the spark of conflict.

THE nesters could ill afford to step a fraction of an inch out of line. Drought had hit them hard and had wiped out sixty percent of their crops. Some of the nesters were not getting enough to eat and their credit at the stores was petering out.

The cattlemen were feeling it too and the unbroken string of rainless days was rubbing their nerves raw. Ranchers to the south were already feeding lean stock on cottonseed cake and prickly pear, and there were some who were driving the cattle to greener pastures.

With these thoughts in mind, Clee Bishop went back across the street to rout Long John out of Tonto Bill's bar. Riders were leaving the town and the noises of revelry were stretching thin.

A sudden tinkling smash set Bishop back on his heels for a moment. A brief silence and then the sound of running boots beat out a drumming tattoo along the walk.

Clee started forward again, breaking into a run as the uproar increased. A wild-eyed man leaped off the planked walk and stumbled toward him. He carried a pick handle in a huge fist.

Bishop yelled: "Alroyd!"

The homesteader's gaunt, stubbled face wore the look of a frightened animal. His eyes were a little crazy. One of his heavy boots slipped from under him and as he went down, something dropped from his big fingers and slid into a wheel rut. Clee Bishop stooped over and picked up the small square bottle.

Rough hands clutched at Alroyd and yanked him to his feet, dragged him to the walk and then pinned him against the side of a big frame building. Someone

had struck the hoeman. A trickle of blood ran from one corner of his mouth.

"I—I went a little crazy, f-friends," Alroyd choked out. "M-my wife's sick. They wouldn't trust me for medicine. I went and got a pick-handle and I smashed the window."

Sheriff "Buff" Hegley appeared and his authoritative voice boomed along the street. Hegley was a compelling figure of a man with a sense of fairness as big as his build.

His bushy-browed steel-gray eyes flayed those who called for Alroyd's hide and they fell back before him as quickly as they would have dodged a pair of six-guns.

"He wanted medicine, Buff," Clee Bishop said. "He took it because they wouldn't let him have it without pay."

"Throw the sodbuster in jail, Sheriff!" someone yelled.

"N-no," pleaded Alroyd. "I g-got a wagon. The storekeeper can have it, Hegley. Reckon that'll pay—"

"Wait," Bishop said, digging into his money bag. "What's the damages?"

"Ten dollars for the window," the storekeeper growled. "Dollar for the medicine. But that nester's disturbed the peace. Lock him up!"

Buff Hegley nodded.

"Reckon I'll put you in jail until tomorrow, Alroyd," he said. "I got the law to uphold. You're still willin' to pay up for him, Bishop?"

"That's what I said," Clee snapped, and handed the storekeeper the amount he asked for.

Punchers muttered angrily as they moved toward the hitch rail.

"Clee's a sucker," Long John Kelso said, slowly shaking his head. "Them hoemen won't never come to help him when he needs 'em."

Alroyd said, "You'll get that stuff to her tonight, Bishop? She needs it bad."

"Yeah," Clee said and went after his horse. Long John fell in step.

"Well heeled tonight, you jigger," Bishop cautioned him. "Watch yourself on the way. I got a different way to go."

"Any salty cuss I meet who's got a gun, I'll see he keeps his distance," Kelso said with a broad grin and swung up on his bay.

II

CLEE BISHOP left Triangle City five minutes behind Long John. He took the road that led through the string of willows lining a stream back of Triangle City and rose up toward the line of buttes separating the town from broken country.

An hour before midnight he dropped down the sloping sides of a narrow valley and came to the first nester cabin. A light was burning there. Clee dropped off his horse, walked to the door and gently pushed it open.

Three gangly kids with pinched faces stared at him. There was the sound of dry coughing from a bed in the corner.

Bishop walked over to the tallest of the three Alroyd kids.

"You see your mother takes that," Bishop said. "Your pa's wagon broke down. He'll be home tomorrer."

The sick woman lifted a hand and smiled her thanks. Bishop tried to say something but words stuck in his throat and he hurried out of the place and got into the saddle.

He rode along the nester strip until he came to a cleared space in the low brush country. There was a crude shack and two small outbuildings on the reclaimed patch of ground. The door of the shack was open and three figures sat out on the rickety porch. This was the Stillwell place.

Bishop leaned out of the saddle and said to Tom Stillwell:

"Up late, ain't you?"

"Too hot to sleep, Clee. Sleep don't come fast when your stomach is groanin'. Al Spain was here again."

"I know it," said Bishop. "I met him in town and I warned him again, Tom. Warned him harder this time."

Bishop looked at Stillwell's sixteen-year-old daughter who had moved into the doorway. The light played on her thin white face. Good food would make her beautiful.

Her brother, fourteen-year-old Wes, was whittling a piece of wood over in the corner. When he looked up there was a vacant stare in his child-like eyes. His jaw hung down and saliva drooled from his mouth.

Wes Stillwell's mind had not developed

along with his body and now at fourteen he was still a child. Instead of being able to ride a horse and handle a plow, all he seemed to want to do was whittle.

When the parson in Triangle City had overheard a man say that Wes Stillwell was absolutely useless, he had disagreed.

"In the Divine Plan, there is nothing useless," the preacher had said. "Nothing exists but is ordained for some purpose."

Clee Bishop remembered those words as he looked at Wes. He guessed a preacher could be wrong.

"I'm makin' a horse," Wes said thickly and laughed a little. "Like the one I'm goin' to ride when I grow up. Got to get me a gun like you got too, mister."

Tom Stillwell hastily changed the subject.

"It's sure enough trouble, Bishop," he said. "All that beef walkin' around the country and no red meat for the likes of us. I kill my cows and I don't get no more milk nor butter. You cattlemen with thousands of head—"

The inference was plain.

"Every one of them cows are worth forty dollars a head, Stillwell," Clee Bishop replied coldly. "Nobody asked you nesters to come in here. We took the same chances you did and it was just as big a fight to hang on . . . I'll be gettin' along. Don't get ideas in your head, Stillwell."

The homesteader grinned bleakly and banged dottle out of his pipe. He said nothing.

Clee Bishop rode on to the Drag 7. There he turned his horse over to a little bow-legged whiskered hand.

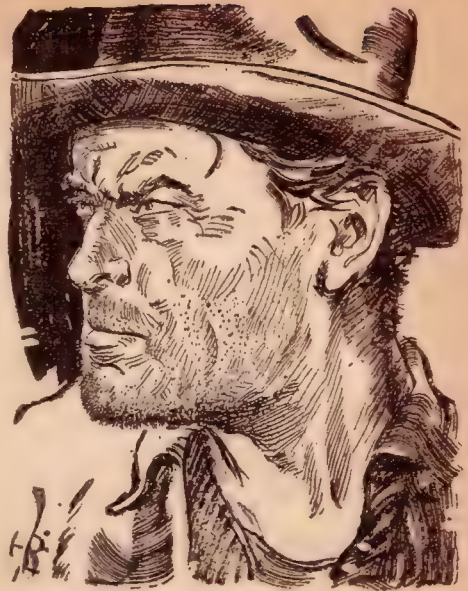
"Kelso get in?" Bishop asked.

"Not yet, Clee. Wasn't he with you?"

"Not since—" Clee cut his words short and grabbed at the straps of his bay. "Get a couple of the boys out and tell them to take the short road to town. I'll be riding that way. Kelso won a sack of money. He left Triangle City alone."

BISHOP rode out through the gate at a gallop and headed toward the long low ridge strung with timber. The heat of the night and the ever-growing fear for the safety of his partner brought beads of sweat to his forehead.

Because of his concern for a nester's sick wife, Bishop had let Long John ride



AL SPAIN

Unarmed but dangerous

back alone. Now he cursed the homesteaders as he rode into the teeth of the wind that came down through a channel in the broken hills.

There were a dozen men in and around Triangle City that would kill for less money than Kelso had carried out of Tonto Bill's. Range wolves have a grapevine telegraph of their own. But Long John, Bishop assured himself, carried a Colt and he had promised to watch his backtrail. He had had his warning.

The road dropped down into a small canyon. Bishop could hear the musical sound of water splashing off the high rocks. Then another sound blended with this. He thought he heard the *chop-chop* of a horse's hoofs.

Clee hauled in and waited. Soon a riderless bronc loomed up out of the mealy darkness ahead. It drew abreast of Bishop's animal and then stopped. Clee reached for its loose reins, a cold hand of death closing around his heart.

"Long John's horse," he gasped.

Bishop rode on up the canyon fearful of what he would find. He forded a wide shallow stream, then climbed the side of a hogback to a great clump of oak trees. It was here that the trailing bronc pulled back and whinnied in terror. Bishop's

own bay shied off the beaten path and refused to go ahead. Horses can smell the presence of death.

Dismounting, Clee crouched low as he walked into the darkness under the oaks. His foot hit against something and he almost fell over the body of Long John Kelso.

Bishop knelt beside the prone figure, calling Long John's name. There was no answer and a numbing silence that seemed to have weight came down over the ridge.

Hoof beats broke the stillness and a voice drifted through the dark.

"Bishop!"

Clee recognized the deep-throated voice of his foreman and a couple of his own Drag 7 riders.

"Here," he called. "Up here."

"Shorty" Drew had brought a lantern. Both men gasped at sight of Long John's wound.

"Shot up close," Clee said tightly, as he held the lantern closer. "Powder burns on his chest."

"How'd Kelso let a man get a drop on him like this, Clee?" one of the punchers asked.

"It—it beats me, Yuma," Bishop said. He looked in Long John's pockets. "No money. It was robbery right enough. Well, we better get him to town. Bring up his horse there, Shorty."

Clee Bishop held the lantern as the Drag 7 riders gently picked up Long John and lashed him to his chestnut bronc.

There were no tracks near the oaks. Nothing to give a man a hint as to the identity of the killer. The ground was hard packed and even if it had been wet and had disclosed a hoof print, Clee knew it would be almost impossible to find the shoe that made it.

Clee studied the immediate vicinity, holding the lantern low. He found nothing.

"Only thing looks sure," he said, "the man who plugged Kelso sat on a horse. The bullet didn't plow upwards through his body."

"I found somethin', Clee," a Drag 7 rider said suddenly. He handed an object to Bishop. It was a horse blanket pin, slightly rusty.

"Could have been here a long time,"

Clee muttered and slipped the big safety pin in his pocket. "Let's take him in," he suggested.

An hour later, the Drag 7 riders walked into an undertaking establishment in Triangle City. Clee and Shorty Drew carried Long John's body inside.

"A job for you, Parkman," Bishop said to the undertaker. "My partner. I want you to do the best job you ever done. Go git Buff Hegley, Shorty."

When the sheriff came, he examined the body.

"Forty-five slug," he said. "Any ideas, Bishop?"

"No. Not any."

Tonto Bill came over from the saloon and he said a few words to Clee before he had a look at Long John.

"Say," Tonto said in a high-pitched voice, "you can see where that horse blanket pin punctured the cloth at the back of his overalls, Bishop. When he put that roll in his pocket, Long John pinned it so's—"

"You saw him do that, Tonto?" Bishop cried out.

"I did."

"Yeah," the Drag 7 owner said tightly. "But it don't get us nowhere. We knew it was robbery in the first place."

"I'll open up the bar, Clee," Tonto Bill said. "We can all use a drink."

Buff Hegley bit out, "I'll be riding, friends."

"Whoever shot him," Shorty Drew said thickly, "surprised him plenty. I want to forget the look I saw in Kelso's eyes. Like he saw someone he never suspected would pull a gun on him."

TENSION piled up in Triangle City on the day of Kelso's funeral. They buried Long John in the little cemetery just outside of the town.

When the preacher had finished and the men were piling dirt on the pine coffin, Clee Bishop walked to the edge of the grave and stood there, hat in hand.

"I'll get him, Long John," he said in a low even voice.

Among others at the funeral were Hack Nethercott, Tunstall and three small ranchers. Al Spain sat his bronc at the edge of the burying ground, his face stony. A group of nesters paid their re-

spects to Long John. They stood close to the grave, heads bared.

Nethercott kept his counsel until the solemnity of the occasion had worn off. Tonto Bill's place was filled with the mourners when the boss of The Hat let loose his pent-up thoughts.

"There's those who needed money bad," Nethercott lashed out. "Kelso carried a lot of it. You saw a man smash a store window with a pick handle only last night!"

"I heard about it," Al Spain sneered and swung his eyes toward Alroyd and the nesters that were gathered there.

Alroyd's glass slipped from his fingers and smashed against the floor. He started toward Nethercott, pushing Al Spain out of his way.

"You're a mighty big man, Nethercott," the hoeman roared. "High and mighty. But you take off that gun, Nethercott. I reckon you'll get a big square meal off me but in the meantime I get myself a tasty snack. Bishop is our friend. Kelso was his partner and you dare to say—"

A Hat puncher planted a big, calloused hand against Alroyd's stubbled face and shoved him back. Clee Bishop saw one of Tunstall's riders drag at his Colt and he leaped forward and smashed the puncher behind the ear with a big fist. Six Drag 7 men fanned out and Alroyd and Stillwell and a dozen nesters got set to back up Bishop.

"You ain't the law, Nethercott," Bishop roared. "You got no proof against Alroyd or any of these other homesteaders. Think it over, Nethercott! Buff'd throw you in jail as quick as anybody else. Kelso was my partner and if anybody is goin' to do any accusin', it'll be me.

"This is my fight, Nethercott. Not yours. The man who murdered Long John won't never get away from me. Start a ruckus, Nethercott, and a bullet can find a big man as well as a little one. Go ahead and turn your hellions loose."

"Reckon I was hasty, Bishop," Nethercott said. "But things are goin' on around here I don't like the smell of. Kelso gettin' killed. I been losin' cows. You're a soft fool, Bishop, and your softness will ruin you."

"You ought to swap them cows of yours for a plow and some grubbers, Bishop,"

Spain sneered. "You're gettin' to smell like a nester." The thin-faced man went out through the door as he flung his words.

"There's some things in the world that needs killin'," Bishop said. He went to the bar and asked for a drink.

Hat and Flying V punchers began to leave Tonto Bill's. Horses' hoofs pounded on the baked mud outside and the tension thinned.

Bishop took his men out. On the planked walk outside he stopped when he saw Wes Stillwell sitting in back of a chuckwagon. Wes looked toward the Drag 7 punchers and gave them his vacuous grin. He was whittling as usual.

"What you workin' on now, Wes?" "Yuma" asked.

"Won't tell you," Wes said and he continued to sharpen his bit of wood.

"He's cut up enough wood in his time to feed all the stoves in Alaska," Clee said. "Why do things like this have to happen, Yuma?"

"Why is Kelso under the ground and a snake like Al Spain—" The puncher cut short his words and quickly changed the subject.

Conversation dragged on the way to the Drag 7. Once in the ranchyard, Bishop said to Shorty Drew,

"Tomorrow, I want you to get a scrub. I want it butchered and quartered and hung up for a day or two. Them hoemen had their belts pulled in plenty today. They're human bein's, Shorty."

"You're the boss, Clee. But I reckon it's a mistake. Nethercott and the others—"

"To the devil with them," Bishop cut in. "Look, you jigger. Handin' them beef'll kind of drown out what temptation they might have in their minds. We got to keep peace on this strip, Shorty. Give a lot of these punchers a sight of nester blood and they'll hanker for a cowman's blood. You do like I say."

III

BISHOP strode up to the ranchhouse to clear away the things that would keep reminding him of Long John. They had been together for seven years. He sat up there in the dark trying to make a clear picture of what might have happened on

that trail out of Triangle City.

Twenty-four hours later, Bishop rode the country looking for a man and Shorty Drew went to the nester strip, leading a bronc burdened with chunks of beef wrapped in burlap.

The meat off that scrub, Shorty knew, would be a little tough but the nesters had strong teeth and stronger appetites. He unloaded a chunk at Stillwell's door and he said to the homesteader, "Nurse it along, friend. Make it last."

"Shorty," Stillwell said. "Can Bishop read a man's mind? I won't try to thank him."

Wes Stillwell began to tear at the burlap making little animal-like sounds. The girl leaned against the door jamb and smiled her gratitude. There seemed little strength left in her.

"I'll be going along," Shorty Drew said. "Got a couple of more calls to make."

On the rim of a low-hanging butte looking down on Stillwell's, a man was hunkered down, his thin fingers absently building a smoke. His teeth gleamed in the murky dark and his eyes closed to mere slits in his hard face.

He threw the cigarette away and drew back into the shadows stretching out from the pines. Bit chains rattled and harness creaked. There came a soft thumping of hoofs on the pine-needles and then the stillness swallowed up these sounds and darkness cloaked the rider heading north.

At midnight he stood with another puncher near a line cabin on the fringe of Nethercott's range and watched clouds roll across the face of the moon.

"Rain mebbe? You know a prayer?"

"Clouds have come over for three days," the other man said. "But them clouds are welcome. Reckon we can cut out a dozen head of Hat stuff tonight."

"Bishop made a fool play tonight. He's played into the boss' hands. A good Colt man can do all right by himself with a range war goin' on. Let's saddle up."

An hour after midnight found these riders driving a small herd of cattle along an aimless, twisting route through timbered, brush-covered ridges and draws of the broken land flanking The Hat's north pasture. They finally drove the stock into a brush corral hidden from the view of any rider unless he were to stumble upon

it by chance.

The shorter of the men took a knife from his saddle roll.

"Rope the leanest one," he called out in a deep whispered voice.

Time dragged. Cattle stamped restlessly. In a corner of the corral, the thick-chested man got up and wiped blood from his hands. Then he climbed over the brush fence and walked into the timber to a rude hut. Here he changed his clothes and washed his hands. When he returned he said briefly, "Got it?"

"Reckon. Let's be ridin', friend."

It was going into September and punchers were talking of "bedding-out" time.

Week end and Tonto Bill's was full of drought-weary cowmen. Their own immediate problems made their quarrel against the homesteaders less bitter.

"We needn't worry about round-up if this keeps up," Tunstall's foreman said. "The tanks and streams are mighty low. Cows'll start totterin' on their pins and we'll have to hire Mex knifers to peel the hides off them that drops."

"Drought and rustlers," Hack Nethercott said and spun around, his back to the bar. "Some rope and ring artists have been busy in my herd. What's the matter with the law on this range?"

"I been busy with a killin', Hack," Hegley threw at The Hat owner. "You got thirty riders in your pay, and they ought to be able to watch your herd until I finish."

"You're gettin' nowhere, Buff," Nethercott countered. "The hombre who gunned Kelso down is in the next state by now and still ridin' hell for leather. I ain't seen Bishop lately."

"Reckon he kind of feels lost in town without Long John," the barkeep said, lifting his voice above the noise. "He's still lookin', too. I wouldn't want to be a certain jasper. Only been three days since they buried Kelso. Let twenty years go by and Cleve will still be looking."

A MAN pushed his way through the slatted doors and lumbered to the bar. It was Shan Hoag, Al Spain's right hand man. The squat rider downed a drink and spun around to let his porcine eyes survey the crowd.

"Hoped you'd be here, Nethercott,"

Shan said. "Rode through Owl Creek awhile ago. The hoemen are eatin' beef."

The hub-bub thinned. Hack Nethercott banged his empty glass down on the bar's slippery surface and let a low curse slide through his teeth.

"You mighty sure of that, Shan?"

"Reckon. You missed any lately, Hack?"

"I aim to see for myself," Tunstall's *segundo* said and moved toward the door. Five Flying V riders pounded at his heels. Hack Nethercott yelled, "Come on, boys!"

Buff Hegley knew that there were times when you could reason with men and times that you couldn't. The prolonged drought had been tightening nerves and wearing out all patience and hope. These punchers would just as soon use the homesteaders as anybody else to let off some of that pent-up emotion.

"I smell gun-powder," the barkeep said and banged his wet cloth on the counter.

Shan Hoag poured himself another drink and smiled crookedly. Then he turned and hurried out into the noisy street.

Buff Hegley slipped out to the walk and shouldered his way along. He turned into an eating place where he found Shorty finishing off a stack of wheats.

"What's the ruckus, Buff?"

"Come to tell you, Drew. Spain's man come in and turned the cattle strip upside down. Said the nesters was chawin' beef. Hat and Flying V punchers are headin' for Owl Creek. You ride for the Drag Seven and get Clee Bishop. Heard he fed them homesteaders that beef. I'm rackin' after these locoed jiggers as soon as I round up a posse."

Shorty Drew wasted no time getting to his bronc. He drove it to the height of its stride before he had kicked up dust from the outskirts of Triangle City.

Hack Nethercott and his riders moved in on Lige Alroyd first. They turned the inside of his shack upside down. The sick woman feebly pleaded with them. Alroyd tried to protest but Hack grabbed him by the throat and sent him headlong out of his own door.

Punchers searched Alroyd's flimsy sheds for signs of cowhide. It was Al Spain who threw the lighted lantern into a shed stuffed with hay. It was Spain who roared, "You'll find signs at Stillwell's

maybe. He's the trouble maker of these dirty nesters!"

Alroyd was on hands and knees, the breath half out of him and flinging curses at the punchers who drove at a fast clip toward Stillwell's. Alroyd's boy fought futilely to put out the fire in the shed as the flames broke through the roof and licked up toward the sky.

Nethercott swung down from his horse in Stillwell's yard, banged his heavy fist against the door. The nester opened the door, then tried to close it again. Nethercott's big boot was thrust into the opening.

"Open up, Stillwell," he roared. "We're searchin' this house!" He put his heavy shoulder against the door and pushed both Stillwell and the door aside.

Tom Stillwell's girl screamed.

"Look, Dad. Alroyd's place—"

"You set fire to his place," Stillwell roared and he leaped to the side and snatched a rifle from a dark corner. A puncher brought his fist up and Stillwell arched over backward and hit the floor. His head struck against the sharp edge

[Turn page]



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of an ax.

Wes Stillwell, the witless boy, cowered in a corner and his lower jaw was shaking with terror.

This was the picture Clee Bishop saw when he came in through the door, Colt in his hand. He had come down off the high rim back of the homesteader's shack just as Nethercott's riders had thundered into the yard. Smoke from Alroyd's burning outfit had drawn him down out of the pockets.

"I gave these nesters the beef," Bishop roared. "No law against givin' it away."

"Maybe you did," Nethercott yelled. "Give 'em an excuse to haul some of mine here. Easy for 'em to slow-elk cows and cut 'em up in the pockets in back of this strip. Keep out of this or I'll stamp you out with the rest of these hoemen!"

Bishop looked down at Stillwell, then dropped on his knees beside him. He lifted the man's head and then let it down gently.

"Hack, you've killed him," Bishop said.

"He come for me with a gun," Nethercott said, his face draining white. "One of my riders floored him."

Hoofs drummed out there in the night. Nethercott seemed on the verge of pulling his men away when Al Spain came in holding a cowhide.

"Found it under the stable out there," Spain ground out. "It packs your brand." He threw the hide at Nethercott's feet. Spain had his left hand swathed in a dirty bandage.

"Funny, Al, you findin' that hide," Bishop said. "I've been wonderin' about that hand of yours."

"Ripped it in barbed wire," Spain sneered. "You backin' these sodbusters, now, Bishop?"

BUFF HEGLEY and three of his deputies crowded into the shack and the sheriff yelled at Nethercott:

"Killin' and lootin', Hack. Settin' buildin's afire. You've gone too far!"

"That hide there has a Hat brand on it, Buff. When has a man been put in jail for stompin' out rustlers?"

"Planted there," Bishop yelled. "Al Spain brought it in." He lunged at Spain, got his hands on the Wet Moon owner's throat and bore him to the floor. The

sheriff dragged Bishop off and flung him toward the door.

"Hard to prove, Clee," Buff said. "You can't just—"

"Yeah, Buff. Hard to prove like Long John's killin'," Clee said hoarsely and he went over to where Tom Stillwell's daughter was in a heap near the body of her father.

"It was an accident, Sheriff," a Hat rider said. "I knocked him down. His head hit an ax blade. I got a dozen witnesses and—"

"Saddle and ride, Hack," Buff said. "You got a rustler here; he's dead anyway. You can't do more'n that to the man."

A wagon filled with nesters came into the yard. Seven hoemen leaped out, rifles in their hands.

Buff Hegley went out and faced them. "You go on back," he said. "There'll be no more bloodshed here!"

IV

HLACK NETHERCOTT and his riders filed out and joined the men in the yard. He stood with his powerful legs placed wide apart and said to the angry homesteaders:

"This is a warnin'. If I was you jiggers, I'd take my families and move on. There's safer places I know." He turned and saw Clee Bishop protectively caring for the girl and poor Wes. "Good idea if you went along with 'em Bishop. We don't want your kind in this strip."

"I'll be here to see them bury you, Hack!" Clee roared. "After they bury Al Spain. I wouldn't brag about the scum you bed down with, Nethercott. Seems either you planted that hide yourself, Hack, or else the jigger who's been stealin' your cows cached the hide under Stillwell's stable. Where else would he get a chance to skin one of your critters?"

Al Spain sneeringly laughed and sidled toward his horse. He motioned to Shan Hoag.

Nethercott's square face filled with rage and the veins at his temples stood out.

"Accusin' me Bishop?" he roared. "I'm figgerin' on smashin' you!"

"Yeah. Take a look around before you go, Hack. Look at the two orphans you

just made. Your salty jigger there killed their pa. They set fire to Alroyd's. If it's ever proved the hoemen didn't steal your stock, you got a fight in the courts."

"He's right, Hack," Buff said. "There was a day when men like you was the law. They're dead and gone."

"I ain't so sure," Nethercott said. "What I told these nesters wasn't in fun. Bishop, you look out!" He pulled his heavy bulk up on his horse and waved his punchers out of the yard.

A nester said: "My woman'll be glad to take Stillwell's girl. She ain't got any of her own. But Wes there—I dunno. He's . . ."

"I'll take Wes into town," the sheriff said. "Tonto Bill told me he needed another hand to clean up and do other jobs. How about it, Wes? There's a nice room in back of Bill's place you could stay in."

The witless boy nodded his head. He looked up at Buff and gave the sheriff his pitiful grin.

"Yeah, I'd like that," he said. "Can I whittle my horse? Can I go in the stores and look at the pretty things? Why are they putting dirt on Paw?" He pointed toward the spot where hoemen were digging a grave. As quickly he took his eyes from that grim scene and looked at Al Spain.

Shorty Drew shivered and nudged Bishop.

"No way of tellin' what goes on inside his head by lookin' at his eyes, Clee," he said. "You think Wes can hate like normal critters? Looks plumb useless to me."

Clee said he did not know. Suddenly he whirled to look for Al Spain. A thought had occurred to him, one that sent chills through his body. He whispered a low curse when he saw Spain and his Wet Moon hands riding hard toward the hills.

"Go on back to the Drag Seven," Clee Bishop said to Drew. "I've got a couple of things to look into." He tossed away his cigarette stub and walked swiftly toward his horse.

"Don't wear a gun," Bishop bit out as he rode away. "They can hang a man for droppin' Spain. But not for beatin' him to a pulp."

Bishop rode north until he came to a

cowtown boasting a railroad stop. Cattle milled in the shipping corrals and the noises and smells drifted through Moore's Siding and added to the grimness of the town.

Punchers from far-flung cattle spreads tramped the walks, and honkytonks dinned with the sounds of sin and trouble.

CLEE inquired about a doctor and soon found himself climbing a short flight of stairs built against the end of a long frame building. He opened a door and walked into a small office. A man smelling strongly of whiskey was stretched out lazily in a chair. He nodded as Clee entered.

Bishop asked the doctor some questions and then gave a description of the man he was inquiring about.

"Yeah, mister," the doctor said. "Sounds like the cowman who was in a couple of nights back. Had a bad lookin' thumb and it was twice the size it ought to have been. I lanced it and tied it up."

"Barbed wire puncture?" Clee said, his voice dry.

"That's what he said. Didn't look like it to me, friend. Somethin' sharper and thinner. Went in the fleshy part of his thumb and come out the other side. Figure, though, that hombre ought to know what stuck him. Anythin' else?"

Bishop shook his head, turned and walked out of the office.

He got back to Triangle City on Saturday and walked into Tonto Bill's saloon. It was mid-afternoon and the heat of the sun still beat down on the dusty streets.

Wes Stillwell was sitting in a chair polishing a battered spittoon. Clee poked a long finger against the back of the boy's neck and said with a smile, "Stick 'em up, cowboy!"

Young Stillwell turned and looked at Clee.

"Hah," he said. "I ain't scairt. I know you wouldn't shoot nobody who didn't wear a gun."

Bishop gave Wes a friendly pat and went over to the bar.

"Seen Al Spain?" Bishop said to the barkeep. "I been lookin' for him for two days."

The man behind the bar shook his head. Bishop half-turned and looked at Wes again. The kid was whittling at a stick

of wood now.

"A six-gun?" Bishop called out to him. "A real gunman has to have two of 'em, don't he?" the witless boy said.

The afternoon dragged on. At dusk, the town began to fill. Triangle City's pulse began to step up a little a few moments after carbide street lamps were lighted.

Nethercott's riders began to trickle in and four hands from the Tumbling K. Clee recognized a trio of Al Spain's Wet Moon riders. Shan Hoag was not with them. There was no sign of Al Spain in Triangle City.

Bishop began to move along the walks, gathering scraps of conversation. Hegley, he heard, was combing the hills for cattle thieves. He had been out since dawn with almost a dozen riders.

Passing Tonto Bill's again, Clee almost seemed to hear Long John's hearty laughter bubbling over the other noises.

Bishop passed the hitchrack and saw two of Al Spain's riders standing there. They seemed nervous, on edge.

"Shan," one said, then bit back the rest of his words when the other fellow nudged him. Bishop strode past, ignoring the men.

Time passed and the town slowly emptied. Lights in the windows began to blink out. Bishop walked into Tonto Bill's and he saw Wes Stillwell climbing a step-ladder that had been dragged under the big swinging lamp. Wes snuffed out the light and the saloon was pitched into semi-darkness.

"I'll be closin' the doors when I mop up, Bishop," the barkeep said. "No more drinks."

"I'll sit here until you close," Clee said, pulling up a chair. "Funny neither Shan nor Al Spain—"

The drumming of hoofs outside seemed to shake the saloon. A man dropped off a lathered bronc, came into the saloon and banged his fist on the counter.

"I want a drink," Al Spain boomed out. "Hop back of the bar, mister."

Bishop got up, called out: "Spain!"

The Wet Moon owner pivoted slowly. "Where you been the last couple days, Al?" Bishop wanted to know. "Been lookin' for you."

"Me and Shan's been after rustlers, Bishop. What you want of me?"

"Chasin' wideloopers without a gun ain't healthy, Spain. And not especially

for a gotch-ear with a yeller streak runnin' up his back," Bishop said as he got in front of Spain and blocked the man's way to the bar. "Only got one good hand, too, huh?"

"I don't want no trouble with you, Bishop!" Spain said and his little eyes shifted, looked toward the rear of the saloon.

"That way out is locked, Al," Bishop said. To himself he added, "Watch yourself, Clee. He's a man with only one good hand and he don't pack a gun. It'll be murder. You got no chance to prove what you're mighty sure of."

"Barbed wire, huh?" Clee said to Spain. "Makes quite a puncture, that stuff. Don't go all the way through a man's thumb. You got rotten blood in you, Al. It infects easy. Everythin' on your anatomy is rotten. The doc at the Sidin' said no barbed wire could've—"

"What're you gettin' at, Bishop?" Spain said in ashaky voice. He kept backing up and Bishop followed his every step, his eyes boring deep into Spain's white face.

"The safety pin that Long John closed up his pocket with, Al. You killed Long John. You had a hideout gun, Al. Reckon when I tear that bandage off your hand and show some hombres the puncture, they'll know it wasn't made from barbed wire and you'll have a sweet time thinkin' up another story."

Al Spain had come into Tonto Bill's with sweat pouring off his face. His horse had the bottom nearly run out of it. His sluggish brain had a lot of loose ends to tie together before Buff Hegley got back to town. Shan Hoag had gone down near the brush corral in the hills when the sheriff's men had opened fire on the riders who were driving Hat cows into a brush corral.

AL SPAIN wondered how much more Clee Bishop knew and desperation gripped every fiber in his loose frame.

Bishop lashed out with a fist and Spain reeled backward, blood spurting from his mouth. He crashed into a table and his good hand reached behind him to save himself from falling.

Bishop heard Wes Stillwell scamper to safety in the semi-darkness. Light streamed in from the one street lamp that had not been snuffed out and its great

shard struck full against Bishop.

It happened suddenly. Spain laughed thickly and pitched toward the Drag 7 owner.

Spain held a gun menacingly in his right hand.

"You lose, Bishop," Spain screeched. "Take it, blast your heart!"

Bishop, even as he pitched to the side and dragged his Colt free, braced himself for the impact of a heavy slug. He had no chance, he told himself, and pulled the trigger. Only one gun roared in Tonto Bill's. His own Colt. He heard a bullet strike Spain and the man tumbled to the floor and coughed liquidly.

The barkeep said, aŵe in his voice: "He had you dead to rights, Clee. But—"

Tonto Bill burst out of his office and he yelled, "He have a gun, Bishop? If he didn't, you—"

"Had one," Clee said and stooped down and picked up the weapon Spain had dropped. It felt strangely light in his hand. He cursed softly and banged it against the table top. It made a hollow, dull sound.

"A—a wooden gun," Bishop gasped. He swung around to look into Wes Stillwell's empty gaze. The witless boy nodded and then he began to shake with blood-chilling laughter.

"Bang! Bang!" Wes said. "You couldn't shoot a man who don't wear no gun. Made it myself and painted it. Like a real six-shooter. You'll bury him now. Like you did my Paw. He won't scare Milly no more. He's dead, ain't he?"

Again he laughed hysterically. Clee got down beside Al Spain and lifted him to a sitting position.

"Come over here, Tonto," he said. "You too, barkeep. You got to hear what Spain says. He's babblin' now."

"Y-yeah, I killed Kelso," Spain said, his voice weakening with every word. "Buff nearly caught me and Shan by that wing corral. I give him—slip. They—they got Shan."

"Keep talkin', Spain. It'll maybe help some where you're goin'."

"Hated Stillwell. Couldn't get—girl," Spain mumbled. "Shan saw Bishop givin' 'em beef. My chance to run them nesters out. Start a war—man can get himself lot of cows during range war. . . . That crazy fool—gimme a gun—wouldn't shoot. I—"

Al Spain's head fell forward on his chest. His life ran out.

Buff Hegley and four men came in just as Spain died.

"Found that brush corral, Bishop," the sheriff said wearily. "We got Shan Hoag. One hombre slipped away. Hat cows there. We saw where there'd been butcherin'— What's this? What's been goin' on?"

"I plugged Spain, Buff. He had a gun," Clee Bishop said and looked at Wes. "How would I know that it was only made of wood?"

The sheriff picked up the gun that lay on the table and he looked at it, slowly shaking his shaggy head from side to side.

"Guess you know where that cowhide come from," Bishop said, "the one Shan pulled out from under Stillwell's stable. Yeah, Al rode in here awhile ago. If it wasn't for him gettin' a gun, he maybe would have got off scot free. Juries do some funny things. He tripped himself up, Buff. His blood was rotten. That horse blanket pin of Long John's marked him. I figured all along it was he who killed Kelso."

"I felt rain on my cheek just as I came in, Bishop," Buff said.

Tonto Bill was telling him the whole story of what had happened as fast as his tongue could wag. Tonto did not know it but he was a preacher talking to Buff and he was saying that in the Divine Plan, there was nothing useless, not even a Wes Stillwell.

The rain came down in a great flood and hammered at the roof and made a heavy dark curtain at the windows.

"I reckon Hack Nethercott and the others won't press a fight against them homesteaders no more, Buff," Clee Bishop said. "They got a lot of fixin' to do. . . . I reckon we could all use a drink."

Tonto Bill did the serving. He lifted his own glass high. The others joined him in the toast.

"To Wes Stillwell," he said, "the saltiest gunslinger in the country!"

The witless boy grinned and sat down by the window to watch the rain. He picked up a stick of wood and began to whittle on it.

None of those punchers in the saloon pitied him any more. Wes seemed to know what he was doing. • • •



The driver piled out, his hands up

ANCHOR in the DESERT

By ALLAN R. BOSWORTH

*Salty Weaver, sea-going
cattleman, sails right into
rangeland plotters*

YONDER where the hot land lay level under the gray-green mesquites, it was pretty much like the sea. When Salty half-closed his eyes, he could fancy the ranchhouse porch lifting and falling like a destroyer's deck. Abruptly a furious little whirlwind twisted through the flat, blowing alkali dust from the cow trails and piling it in a thin, high spiral to spoil the nostalgic illusion.

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Salty sighed. The rimrocked hills beyond the Pecos were barren islands swimming in the liquid shimmer of the heat waves, but the sea could scarcely have been more remote. He glanced at the girl who was considerably closer.

She wore dark glasses and cool-looking denim slacks. She was completely relaxed in a huge rocking chair, with her low-heeled oxfords propped on the peeling paint of the porch rail.

Salty's last name was Weaver. For a moment he contemplated the misfortune that had made Wilma's last name Suggs. Wilma Suggs! The two didn't jibe. He tried briefly to trace the distant female relative who had married a man named Suggs and made Wilma Salty's fifth cousin and, what was more annoying, his partner in a Texas Ranch.

Then, following her usual habit, she interrupted.

"Why don't we take a boat ride on the Pecos?"

She'd been watching him all the time behind those dark glasses. He colored from the neck of his dungaree jumper.

"Better not, today," he said. "Six-shooter and Shanghai will be back any minute."

"Six-shooter" and "Shanghai" were old shipmates of Salty's. They had thirty days' leave from the U.S.S. *Creighton*, whereas Salty had his big ticket—his honorable discharge. And, he reflected, he had ninety days in which to reenlist without losing continuous service. It was all right for Sixshooter and Shanghai to ride the pasture with the foreman and otherwise enjoy themselves. They didn't face the prospect of staying here, so far from the sea.

"You still don't like this country, do you?" Wilma asked.

Salty shook his head. "It's dusty and hot and monotonous. It gets on your nerves."

THE girl sniffed. It was a slight sound, but it plainly implied that Salty Weaver should like the country, because he had inherited an interest in a huge chunk of it. That was the main trouble with her, he thought. Uncle Jarvis had willed her a forty per cent interest, too, and she was flattered at being a landhold-

er. She couldn't see that the land was a white elephant. A great, dusty elephant, white with alkali and unbearably hot.

"But isn't the ocean monotonous?" she insisted. "Doesn't it all look the same when you're out of sight of land?"

Salty's gesture of protest was feeble. The argument was getting harder to maintain.

"Maybe, but you're going somewhere, doing something. It's hard to explain. The Navy sort of gets in your blood. Look at Sixshooter, he came from the New Mexico ranch country and he's been in since the war. And Shanghai's got nearly eight years' service."

And, he thought, there were a lot of other shipmates on the *Creighton*, which was now going through the Canal. Panama City and Colon and then Guantanamo, not a lovely place in itself, but a way-point for Havana—

"Doesn't anybody have a real name in the Navy?"

Interrupting again! A man couldn't even think with her around.

"Just on the paymaster's books. Look, Wilma, I've been thinking. There's no use kidding myself. I ought to ship over."

She got up. She was nearly as tall as he. Perhaps her eyes would be pretty, if a man could see them. Now he sensed scorn flashing behind the dark lenses.

"Ought to ship over?" she repeated. "That's all you can think about! With a forty per cent interest in a ranch that ought to be worth a half-million dollars, you ought to go back to the Navy!"

"What do you care?" he asked politely.

"I don't, except that the ranch can be made to pay. I'm going to hold onto my share and make it pay!"

Salty snorted. "It hasn't made a cent for years. Neither of us knows the stern of a steer from the bow. I'm not going to hang an anchor on my neck until I've seen more of the world. I can make first-class petty officer next cruise."

"You're a quitter, that's all!"

The arrival of men on horseback saved him from searching for a retort. There were four, instead of three. Shanghai Sayres and Six-shooter Billings made incongruous figures, riding in their Navy uniforms with bellbottoms flapping. Buck

Sapp, the foreman, was lean and leathery, riding like a part of the saddle.

The fourth was Gearhardt, Pecos Junction attorney and executor of Uncle Jarvis Weaver's estate. He owned the balance of control with twenty per cent of the ranch. He looked more like a cattleman than a lawyer, except for a paunch and florid jowls that bounced when he rode.

Salty Weaver knew the showdown had come, that Gearhardt was there to discuss future management of the Flying W. It was time to speak his mind and tell them he was going back to the Navy.

Shanghai got off on the wrong side of the horse and barely escaped disaster. Six-shooter yelled that Shanghai was no admiral and ought to use the port gangway. Then the two of them stamped on the porch, with alkali shaking from their blues.

"Say," declared Shanghai, who was red-headed and freckled, "this is a swell layout! When I get my shipping-over leave, I'm coming back here to spend it with you, Salty. Six-shooter and I pulled that old rowboat out for overhaul. Tomorrow we're going to take a little cruise down the river."

Six-shooter Billings grinned. The reckless light in his blue eyes explained why he hadn't made a chief petty officer's rating in more than twenty years of service. He was too busy having a good time, though he was one of the best gunner's mates in the outfit.

"Same old stuff," Six-shooter grunted. "Sailor goes ashore and rents a boat. Spends all his money rowing around the lake in Central Park!"

GEARHARDT cleared his throat and hastily got down to business. "If you don't mind, Mr. Weaver, we ought to discuss plans for the ranch. I think Buck should join the discussion, since the active management has been in his hands for several years."

"I'm ready," Wilma said.

She took off her glasses. It was the first time Salty could remember her removing them in the light of day. He stared at her, because her eyes were just like the sea when clouds are drifting over it and the sun is lighting up sparkles

here and there. Then Six-shooter Billings was drawing him aside while the others went into the big living room.

"Listen, kid," the old-timer whispered warningly, "don't let them put anything over on you. This Gearhardt hombre looks like a sea lawyer to me. Remember that you're the skipper around here. Maybe you don't own any more than the girl, but she's only a female and she don't rate. You're the skipper! Got that?"

Salty grinned. "Thanks, Six-shooter. They won't put anything over on me, because I'm going to tell them they can keep the ranch. This is no life for me. I'm going to ship over."

"No, not yet, kid." Six-shooter's eyes had a faraway look. "You got time to decide that. Stall 'em. I been looking over the range and it's plumb good. If the ranch ain't making money, it's because it ain't been run right. You stall 'em, see?"

Gearhardt's voice was oily as Salty sat listening in the living room. With a ledger before him, he went into the matters of drought, the high price of feed and low price of beef. Six cowhands at sixty-five dollars a month apiece, Buck Sapp at ninety. And rustlers—

"Rustlers?" Wilma Suggs sat upright in her chair at the end of the table opposite Salty. "You mean cattle thieves?"

Gearhardt nodded and sorrowfully rubbed his fat jowls.

"But I thought things had changed," the girl complained. "I mean that people surely can't steal cattle any more."

Buck Sapp looked at her and Salty thought he saw something peculiar in the foreman's eyes.

"You see, Miss Suggs, we're pretty close to the Border. Rustlers don't steal whole herds, like they once did, but they sneak in and take a dozen beef steers at a time. It's mighty hard to catch them."

Wilma nodded and smilingly thanked Buck. Salty fidgeted in his seat.

"Then, of course," Gearhardt resumed, "there is an occasional outbreak of hoof and mouth disease, or blackleg. Those are hard to control."

"Look, Mr. Gearhardt," Salty said, "let's skip some of the mournful details. How much did the Flying W lose last year?"

The lawyer deliberated.

"Something between eleven and twelve hundred dollars. There was an increase in the tax rate. We would have lost more, but I succeeded in leasing a portion of the range for oil drilling."

"But they didn't strike oil?" interrupted Wilma.

"They didn't," Gearhardt admitted.

Salty got up and hitched his trousers up fore and aft.

"I don't know anything about the ranch business and maybe I don't want to," he stated. "What would my interest bring, in case I sold it?"

"You can't!" cried the girl. "I read Uncle Jarvis' will. It says you can't sell for ten years. Neither can I."

Gearhardt smiled. "That is true. Of course, suit might be brought to break the conditions imposed by the will. If you are determined to sell, I might arrange for some disinterested attorney to handle the matter."

"I might want to own a slice of a ranch, if there was any money in it," said Salty, "but I don't want a white elephant. I can go back to the Navy."

"The Navy!" Wilma broke in furiously. "That's all you think about!"

HE TURNED to smile condescendingly at her.

"Well, the Navy's a lot different from this set-up. At least it's efficient. If a ship goes out to win the engineering E, her skipper runs her like he would a business. There's no waste, no—well nothing like hoof and mouth disease, or rustlers, or—"

He stopped and took a deep breath. Gearhardt's smile annoyed him and Buck Sapp was chuckling and watching Wilma's face.

"You'd shore have one tough time," Buck drawled, "tryin' to run a ranch like they run the Navy."

"Think so?" demanded Salty. "Navy regulations are about as simple a setup as—"

"Why don't you?" Wilma wanted to know.

Salty glanced at her, saw that her lips were parted and her eyes shining. Gearhardt cleared his throat again.

"Getting back to the main topic," he said, "you might think over the matter of bringing suit against the conditions of the

will. I might buy your interest myself, provided Miss Suggs would sell, too. Since I deal in livestock commissions, it might be possible to carry the ranch along until it got out of the red."

But Salty's fist hit the table. "Navy regulations!" he exclaimed. "I'm the skipper. You—well you can be the exec, Wilma. We'll try it for a month. Shanghai and Six-shooter can stand watches as officer of the deck. We'll have a taut ship, or else!"

Gearhardt shoved back his chair.

"You serious?" he demanded. "It's like Buck said. It isn't possible to run a ranch that way."

Before the sailor could answer, Wilma came around the table and stood before him with a passable salute. "Hi, Skipper!" she smiled. "We'll try it, anyhow."

In the cool of sundown, the three Navy men and the girl walked down to the Pecos. Gearhardt had gone, somewhat in a huff. Buck Sapp was busy telling the returned cowhands that those new little white hats allowed too much sun to strike a man's head.

Six-shooter pointed to the sluggish stream. It was scarcely thirty feet wide and so murky that it was impossible to guess the depth. Salt cedars lined the banks, no higher than the greasewood and broomweed of the flat. A man could fall into the river before he knew he was within a mile of water. Kildeers swooped in the dusk with their mournful cries as the four halted by the old skiff.

"She's some river!" enthused Six-shooter. "Taste that water, you hombres."

Eagerly they dipped up handfuls. Salty spat and made a wry face. "It's just like the ocean!"

"Yeah, she's a salty old stream. She starts way up in New Mex and winds about two thousand miles to cover less than a thousand. Up at the start, the water's clear, but she twists through so many alkali flats, by the time she gets here a cow can't drink it. She's so crooked, a feller once shot a deer across the stream, swam over to get it and discovered it was on the same bank all the time."

Shankhai snorted. "That ain't nothing to the old *Tuscarora* on the Yangtze patrol. That river is so crooked, the ship once rammed herself in the stern—"

"I want to go for a boat ride, Salty," Wilma broke in.

"Nix!" Six-shooter declared. He drew Salty aside, calling back to the girl that the boat needed overhauling before it could be trusted. Then he whispered to Salty: "Look, mate, you got to stall on that, too. Once you get a female in a boat, she starts getting moon-eyed and the first thing yuh know you're both overboard. There's something about boat rides—I don't know what it is, but it never fails. You want to keep things on a business basis, don't yuh?"

Salty grinned. "Strictly regulation. Let's go back to the house, I want to draw up the work-and-drill schedule for tomorrow."

THAT notice, tacked to the outside wall of the bunkhouse, was bound to create a considerable stir. Buck Sapp swore loudly when he saw it. The other hands came on the run.

U.S.S. FLYING W
Anchored as Before

0540—Reveille for all hands.

0600—Turn to. Scrub down weather decks. Sweep down corrals. Dry down by 0730.

0730—Breakfast.

0800—Mustering on stations and submit reports of absentees to the executive Officer's office prior to 0830.

0830—Sick call.

0900—Working party leaves ship under First Lieutenant Sapp.

1200—Dinner.

1300—Working party leaves ship under First Lieutenant Sapp.

1730—Supper.

1900—Tactical school for officers in wardroom.

2200—Taps.

NOTE: Uniform of the day will be blue work-shirts, jeans, red neckerchiefs, Stetsons, boots and spurs. All hands will be required to pass Captain's inspection at quarters.

William Suggs
Executive Officer

Jack Weaver, Yeoman 2c, U.S.N., Commanding.

"Look here, Miss Suggs!" Buck yelled. "I quit! What's more, some of the other boys won't stand it either."

"Now, Buck!" she interrupted characteristically and smiled brilliantly, "You can try it awhile. You wouldn't leave the ship, would you?"

Shanghai snorted. "He would, because it's sinking and you know what leaves a sinking ship."

Buck let this go over his head.

"Well, I might stay awhile, but this ain't no way to run a ranch. If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't stay a minute."

Wilma patted his shoulder and thanked him. Then Six-shooter began bellowing in a bosun's mate's voice for the men to turn to.

The morning orders meant just what they said. The porch was scrubbed down and the corrals were raked. At eight o'clock Six-shooter lined Buck and the six cowpunchers on the porch.

"Pull that stomach in, you!" he rasped. "Chest out! Get a regulation neckerchief. Attention to muster!"

They called the roll. Six-shooter informed the first man who answered that a "sir" had to be tacked on the "here." Salty ordered four of the six to shine their boots and pointed out that the fifth man had dirty spurs.

"What is this?" growled Buck Sapp. "We ain't slaves!"

"Pipe down in ranks!" roared Six-shooter.

He advanced threateningly on the foreman. Perhaps it was only the strangeness that kept Sapp from meeting the advance—that and Wilma.

"I'm sure the first lieutenant intends to set an example for the rest," she said.

She had removed her glasses, and her eyes worked wonders. First Lieutenant Sapp subsided.

The working party left, with orders to muster the cattle in the south pasture. Salty called the officers together.

"We'll do this right," he said. "Shanghai, you're a signal man. Make some flags. I know semaphore and so does Six-shooter. We'll use this windmill for a crow's nest and from the platform you ought to be able to see the divide windmill. Six-shooter, you're the gunnery officer. Take charge of that brace of forty-fives Uncle Jarvis left on the wall. We'll divide the watches."

He grinned at Wilma and she smiled back. He had never imagined that running a ranch could be such a lot of fun.

It was fun for three days. One cowboy went over the hill, as Shanghai reported his desertion, but jobs were scarce and the others stuck. Then, about 1400 by the Navy's twenty-four hour clock on the fourth day, another puncher rode in from

the pasture with word that at least a dozen prime beef steers had been rustled the night before. There were no tracks, because the canyon beds leading from the divide were rocky and rain had fallen about daylight.

Salty slammed shut the ledger he had converted into the ship's log.

"Man the telephone, Shanghai!" he ordered. "Send the sheriff an SOS."

Wilma shook her head bewilderedly. "I still can't believe it!"

Six-shooter took down the brace of guns, fondled them lovingly.

"When I shipped into the outfit the first time," he explained, "I was packing one of these. That's where I got my handle. They took the hogleg away from me at Goat Hill, but there was a war, wasn't there?"

"We're out looking for one right now," Salty said grimly. "Shanghai, man the crow's-nest and keep a sharp lookout."

Half an hour later the signal man bawled down from the windmill:

"Auto two points off the starboard bow! She's changing her course! She's dead ahead!"

"It's the sheriff," Salty told Wilma. "Six-gun, prepare to fire a salute!"

Wilma looked from one to the other, the color high in her cheeks.

"How many guns does a sheriff rate?"

"Give him nine."

Six-shooter stood on the porch with a gun in each hand. As the car drew near, the first roared.

"If I wasn't a gunner's mate I wouldn't be here," Six-shooter said. "Fire two!"

Bang!

"I've left my wife, I've left my home and everything that's dear. Fire three!"

Bang!

"I didn't know Six-shooter was married," Wilma said, between shots.

"He's not." Salty grinned. "That's how you time salutes."

GRUMBLING, the sheriff jumped from his car. He was a sparse man with a close-cropped mustache and a burning curiosity to know what was being celebrated. Gearhardt piled out behind him.

"It's plain foolishness, McGee, that's what!" he yelled. "This—this young squirt's trying to run a ranch like he

would a ship. It won't work."

"It's working," Salty retorted.

"I warn you!" Gearhardt shook his fist. "You're not only jeopardizing your own interests, but that of Miss Suggs and mine. If you keep on this way, I'll get a writ of restraint."

"Let's get some horses right now," suggested McGee.

They found nothing besides the place where the fence wire had been cut and then tied together again. The sheriff and Gearhardt went back to town. The lawyer was still fuming.

Salty made an entry in the ship's log—twelve steers at an estimated value of seventy-five dollars a head. It was no wonder the Flying W was in the red.

He called Shanghai and Six-shooter.

"Look, you guys came here for fun. I guess I made a mistake by staying this long. But if we could go to Battle Condition Two and stand watch, maybe we'd learn something."

"Shoot, Skipper," Shanghai invited.

"Get a flashlight," Salty went on. "Don't let anybody see you. Stand by on the divide windmill and use Morse code. One of us will stay on the windmill down here. It's tough for anybody to rustle here in the Pecos Valley, because someone might be coming along the road. But up there they can strike without being seen."

"I got you," said the redhead. He hitched up his trousers. "But I'm taking a horse. If there's any trouble—"

"If there's any trouble," Salty finished, "we'll all be in on it."

Nothing happened that night, except that there was an almost full moon. Six-shooter took the first watch atop the windmill. Salty relieved him at midnight.

On the next night, the moon was perfect and Wilma insisted it was just meant for a ride in the boat that had been overhauled. Six-shooter caught Salty's eye and shook his head. Salty said no, whereupon Wilma lifted one shoulder disdainfully and strolled down to the corrals.

A little later Salty saw her sitting on the top bar with Buck Sapp, watching the moon. They were sitting close together and Buck had his arm around the girl to keep her from falling.

Salty turned this over in his mind and thought that Wilma Sapp didn't sound any

better than Wilma Suggs. But he had to relieve Six-shooter at midnight again, so he turned in early.

It was 0130 when the pinpoint of light pricked the gloom from the divide. Salty rubbed sleep from his eyes and answered. Then the message came. Using dashes and dots, Shanghai was sending slowly, nervously:

"Trucks — two — down — by — fence — No — light — I — hear — cattle."

Salty flashed back the order to come in quickly. Then he risked his neck in a mad scramble down the ladder. So modern rustlers operated on rubber tires!

He had planned some sort of alarm to sound battle stations, but now he was glad nothing had been worked out. There was no use calling Sapp or the other punchers. This was the Navy's job.

He roused Six-shooter. The old-timer instantly was alert.

"General quarters!" Salty panted. "They're loading cattle into trucks. Shanghai's coming in. We've got time to head down the river and cut 'em off when they come out of the canyon. Can you pull an oar?"

Six-shooter snorted. "Can I pull an oar? I used to be on the champion Fleet whale-boat crew!"

WILMA came out of her room, fully dressed. Salty knew she had heard. He motioned her back.

"This'll be no place for you," he stated. "It might be dangerous."

There was mutiny brewing on the Flying W. He could see it in her eyes.

"I own as much of this ranch as you do!" she cried. "It's a boat ride and I'm going. So there!"

Salty looked at Six-shooter and the veteran spread his hands in a defeated gesture. Deprived of moral support, Salty growled:

"Well, come along, then."

Shanghai rode into the yard, holding tightly on the saddle-horn.

They hurried silently to the river and got aboard. The moon rode westward. Wherever it touched the water, the Pecos was transformed and girt with romance. The wind brought the pungency of grease-wood and sage, and Six-shooter's oars made music. Wilma sat in the stern with

Salty. He was glad he hadn't been called upon to row, because yeoman seldom are.

"Isn't it beautiful?" the girl said.

Her cheek was on Salty's shoulder and it was just as Six-shooter had said. Salty looked down into her eyes. The moon was there and he had a feeling that they were both overboard.

The river twisted. Canyon walls crowded steep and close, shutting out the moonlight. As Six-shooter let the boat drift, they heard him loading his guns.

"Give me one of those," said Salty.

Shanghai held up his hand for silence. For a minute there was only the ripple of water around them. Then the drone of engines came from the left and beyond, muffled by rock walls. Six-shooter handed over a gun and bent back to the oars.

When they came into moonlight again, it was to round another bend and see a gravel bar, its skeletal whiteness broken by clumps of wild walnut. Six-shooter grunted.

"That's it. Draw empties there. No tree ever grew on Pecos water. It's just like the sea. And that gravel bar makes a shallow for a truck crossing."

"Land her," ordered the skipper.

The droning grew louder and was accompanied by an undertone of grinding gears. The boat touched. Shanghai sprang out of the bow and pulled it a little way up on the land.

"Duck behind the brush." Six-shooter pointed to tire marks. "They come by right here."

Salty thrust Wilma behind him.

"Shoot the tires," he said. Then, to the girl: "Stay back. You can't do anything, anyway, and—"

"I don't hear any cattle," she interrupted. "Do you suppose we've made a mistake?"

"If we have, that's their tough luck. They haven't any business on the ranch after dark."

Salty moved behind a clump of walnut that was head-high. When he looked around, the girl was still with him. It was too late to do anything about her, because the lead truck was switching on lights for the crossing. Salty drew a deep breath and held it. The grip of Uncle Jarvis' .45 felt good in his hand. There was a second of comparative silence while

the driver of the first truck shifted into low gear. Then, as the big machine lurched forward again, Salty pointed the gun and squeezed trigger.

The report of the pistol was cannon loud and he must have hit the tire, for air was whistling from it. But he heard glass shatter, too, and there were shouts of alarm from the driver. Then came another shot—two of them—and yells from behind. Six-shooter and Shanghai had jumped the second truck.

The driver piled out, his hands up. He left the door open and another man fell across the seat and lay with head in the moonlight. There was a smear of blood on his face.

"Hijackers!" shouted the driver. "What's the big idea? We ain't got nothing you can take!"

"No, just Flying W cattle," retorted Salty.

He took a step forward, wondering how he had managed to shoot a man and a tire at once. Wilma dropped a sizeable stone and he knew she'd thrown one through the windshield.

"We haven't got any cattle, bud," protested the driver. "This is a tank truck. Look for yourself."

At the moment this information meant nothing to Salty. That man with the smeared face was Gearhardt, showing enough life to moan and pull himself around and out of the cab. Six-shooter came up, marching the other man, and Shanghai was twisting the captive's arm.

"Let go!" the prisoner howled. "You ain't got anything on me. Gearhardt hired us to truck this oil. He said it was his well and it's his business if he knocked down the derrick and piled brush over the pipe line. It ain't ours."

"No, but it's mine!" Salty exclaimed. He grabbed Gearhardt's collar and shook the attorney until the fat jowls quivered. "Come clean!" the sailor ordered. "First, where are the cattle?"

"They weren't stolen!" Gearhardt

moaned. "There never was any stolen. I just had Buck move 'em to the south pasture and the punchers thought they were rustled. You can check up."

SIX-SHOOTER spat. "I get it. There's still a idea in this country that a man ought to be strung up for rustling. Maybe they wouldn't be too tough on a guy who caps an oil well and says there wasn't any oil, because that's something new. This law shark thought a little rustling would help make you sell out cheap!"

"I'll explain!" jabbered Gearhardt. "I'll square up. There wasn't much oil taken out—just a few tanks!"

Salty gave him a shove.

"So Sapp was in on it with you," he said. "We can send you both to jail and there's just one way you can stay out—sign over your twenty per cent. Wilma and I don't want any more partners. Understand?"

Gearhardt mumbled something. Salty nodded to Shanghai and Six-shooter.

"Take 'em on into town as soon as they've changed tires. And make this guy sign over his interest, or turn him over to the sheriff. I'll take Wilma home."

It was a long pull up the river for a yeoman, especially for a yeoman who remained moon-eyed long after the moon was gone and the daylight made the gray-green mesquites look like the sea at dawn.

"Buck Sapp had his arm around you," Salty said accusingly to her.

Wilma snuggled closer, getting in the way of the oars.

"I was just trying to make you jealous," she whispered. "I didn't want you to go back to the Navy."

Salty could feel that anchor around his neck, just as plain as if it had been real and not Wilma's arms. He kissed her and the boat drifted downstream for fifty yards. He was thinking that Wilma Weaver would be a pretty good name for a girl who was learning fast not to interrupt. She didn't open her mouth once to talk while he was kissing her.



Princess and Cowboy Meet on DESTINY RANGE in the Novel by
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WILD GEESE CALLING

*Who was the guardian angel
protecting Dora and her Dad
on their perilous venture?*

a novel by

WILLIAM FREEMAN HOUGH

I

DORA GRAHAM stood near the bow of the river steamboat, facing the crisp, clean breeze that swept down from the north over the turbulent bosom of the Columbia. It was much better here than in her cabin which was stuffy with the fumes of whisky and tobacco smoke. She stood there among the tons of her father's freight, looking ahead, searching for the rock which would indicate Whiskey Point and the end of the river journey.

The late afternoon sun slanting down from the high palisades of the west bank turned the river's many whirlpools from jade green to gold. It seemed to soften the aspects of those varied and treacherous currents. It also revealed to her a sudden and startling picture—that of a man standing upright in a small skiff. As she watched his swift approach the small craft was caught in a vortex of twisting water. He bent over, and with one long, hard thrust of an oar sent his boat to smoother water.

He was tall and straight, like a yellow

pine, and as supple as a whip. The sun glinted on long yellow hair that fell to his shoulders. He wore leather breeches and leather jacket, unfringed and tight across the flat muscles of his chest.

Dora tried to call out a warning, for he was sending his small boat directly across the bow of the steamer. For a moment he was lost to her view, then hands grasped the edge of the deck. He vaulted into her vision much as a swallow might soar up from the water, and stood there before her, lips spread in a smile that broke the sharp lines of his chiseled features.

"Ma'am, you're really beautiful," he said.

With a slight nod of his head he went past her, threaded his way through the piles of freight and vanished into a cabin. Her last glimpse of him for the moment showed a hand resting on the handle of a knife sheathed at his waist.

The skiff he had used was bobbing along

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far to the stern, discarded and forgotten. It must have taken great skill and courage to ride that frail boat down the river to meet the steamer. And why should a man take such a chance when the freighter was only a few miles from its destination?

Again she thought of the slim hand resting on the knife. Had he come to meet some enemy? Sudden death was not strange in this violent world of hers.

She waited for several minutes, but the monotonous sound of the boat's paddle and the faint rumble of men's voices in the cabins never altered. At length she walked aft, following the narrow passage-way between the cabins and the rail. Through the windows she could see men at card tables with bottles of whisky before them. Hard-looking men they were for the most part, men who had never ceased drinking or playing since the boat

had left Salute days before. But the slim and supple stranger was not in sight.

SHE came upon him at the stern where the deck was wet and the noise of the churning paddle wheel drowned out all other sound. He was standing before her



Briston saw the point of Shane's knife not far from his throat

A Handsome Fighting Man of the Wilds

father, talking, and Cash Graham was nodding. When he saw Dora he beckoned her.

"This is Shane Cody," her father said, speaking above the *slap-slap* of the paddles. "Lives at the far side of King's Bench. We've heard of him."

Dora found her hand resting in a soft but firm grip. Shane Cody? She had never heard of him at all. But it was surely good to look at him after days with those men in the cabins.

"Shane wants to help us get the freight over the hills," went on Cash Graham. "We need the help, and I've taken him on."

"It'll be a pleasure to travel with you, ma'am," said Shane Cody.

Dora nodded. She was wondering if this were the sole reason the man had ridden the skiff down from Whiskey Point. She remembered the hand upon the knife as he had entered the cabin. Looking at him now, she saw that his eyes were as cool and gray as the ice that occasionally floated past on the current. Cool and gray, but friendly just now.

They moved back along the rail, and she saw him glance through the cabin windows. It was a quick encompassing glance, and she was more than ever convinced that he was searching for someone. Again at the bow, they sat down amidst the freight, out of the wind bite. Shane Cody began to talk, and Dora liked the sound of his voice.

"You've been gone two months, Graham," he said. "There's been a late storm in the hills and there's a good deal of snow at Top Pass. It'll be heavy going for freight wagons up yonder."

"Did Bert Bristow get through?" asked Cash Graham.

"He's waiting at Whiskey Point."

Dora supposed that she should be thrilled and excited to hear that Bert Bristow was waiting at Whiskey Point, but she wasn't. During her two months absence from King's Bench she had easily managed to forget the man who helped her father run the small trading post back in the hills. Bert Bristow took her too much for granted, something she didn't

like, and she was afraid that her father had accepted a certain condition that did not appeal to her. Both men were somewhat on the stolid side, plodding directly through life, headed toward one set goal.

"We'll load as soon as we get in and be off by dawn," said Graham.

Shane Cody squatted on the deck, his slim fingers playing with a burlap bag. Dora spoke to him.

"What do you do up at King's Bench?" she asked.

Again he smiled at her, and showed teeth whiter than the bleached bones that marked the hard trail through the hills.

"I have a few cattle up there, ma'am. And in the winter I run a trap line."

His was a wild life, she guessed; wild but clean. He was clean inside and out. No squatting around a stove or a card table for him. Nothing so prosaic as that. Her blood began to run a little faster.

It was dusk when the steamer rounded a point and announced its arrival by a long whistle blast. Peering through the half light, Dora could see figures running for the small wharf. Here and there a lantern bobbed. The card games in the cabin broke up and men came on deck.

There was much confusion after that. Shane Cody leaped ashore when the bow still was ten feet from the dock. He helped with the landing stage and was the first to seize upon the freight.

Dora stepped ashore and into the waiting arms of Bert Bristow. She pushed him back. "Not here!" she protested. "With people watching."

"Ain't you glad to see me?" asked the big man huskily.

"Why—why, of course, Bert."

"Well, everybody knows we're going to be married."

"Oh! They do?" She saw Shane Cody passing them, a smile upon his lips. Seeing him made her say, "You've been telling that about? You assume a great deal, Bert. I haven't said yet—"

"But we all know it," he broke in. His eyes followed Cody. "Who's that?" he asked.

"A man my father's hired to help us get the freight to King's Bench."

Champions Freighters in the River Country

"We don't need no help," Bristow said sullenly.

"Suppose you tell that to Cash Graham," she said and slipped from his grasp.

WALKING up the sandy bank, she stood to one side and watched the freight come ashore. It began to pile up, and Bert Bristow brought down the three great wagons and backed them up to be loaded.

There was much shouting and laughter and labor, for this was a great event. Once more only would the boat come up the river to Whiskey Point before snow fell the next winter. A man fell off the



landing stage and was almost drowned before rescued. A barrel of whisky slipped off the far side of the boat and was lost forever. Through it all Shane Cody worked steadily, loading freight into the wagons.

Dora saw that his eyes were ever searching the faces about him.

"We'll bed in the wagons tonight," said her father. There were great drops of perspiration on his face. "Make an early start. The horses in good shape, Bert?"

"I seen to that," was the reply. "But Cash, we don't need this other feller. There's three of us to drive."

"It's a tough trail, Bert, and Dora is light for the brake. He goes with us, and I'm glad of the help."

She walked away from them, disgusted with Bristow's clumsy attempt to be rid of Shane Cody. Bert Bristow was about as subtle as an ox.

She was down by the river presently,

hearing the sibilant whisper of the shore current. It would be a long time before she viewed the mighty Columbia again, and she was sorry. Ahead of her were long months at King's Bench, with no sight of another white woman except when some rancher's wife made a rare visit to the post. Long months of fending off Bert Bristow, for she was determined that she would not be hurried into a marriage with the man.

"I just won't do it!" she cried aloud.

"You won't do what, ma'am?" said a cool voice near her side.

"Oh! It's you, Shane Cody, I didn't hear you come."

HIS low laugh ran smooth, like water over small stones. "I get around," he said.

They stood there, side by side, and Dora was thankful he didn't repeat his question. Perhaps he had guessed what she meant. And then she felt his hand upon her arm.

"Do you hear it?" he whispered to her.

"The river, Shane?"

"No. That sound up there in the sky, off across the river."

She listened and heard the faint cry of some high-flying bird.

"Geese," he told her. "Wild geese flying north. It's spring, Dora. Spring and new life."

"It sounds wild and weird."

"Wild, yes. They're going to the lakes and lagoons above King's Bench. They're free, free as the air. That's the way life should be. We should be the same, take all that life can give, live every minute of it."

"What are you saying, Shane Cody?"

"I thought you'd understand."

She waited a moment. The wild cry of the geese was fading. Her heart struck hard inside her and the knowledge of what he meant ran like a streamer of fire through her body.

"Yes," she whispered, "I do understand."

"Listen," he said tensely. "Another flock of geese." He took a firmer grasp on her arm. "Come with me!"

"Where?"

"There's dancing up in town. We can't fly, but we can do the next best thing."

"My father doesn't like dancing, Shane. I mustn't go with you."

"Is that life, then? You cannot take a little pleasure?"

Dora caught her breath. "Yes, I will go. Take me there, Shane Cody."

II

IT WAS an impetuous thing to do, but something had seized upon Dora, made her eager and thirsty for the thing she had been taught was not good for a girl. She was running up the dirt street, skirts flying and hand locked in Shane's. He ran easily, without exertion, lips parted and eyes bright. They might as well have been a pair of the wild geese hurrying along to a rendezvous with life. The whine of a scraping fiddle issued from an open door.

He swung her toward it and she suddenly found herself in the unaccustomed atmosphere of a dance hall.

Any regrets she may have felt died a-borning, for Shane Cody swept her into his arms and out across the floor. She was dimly conscious that there were other dancers there, men and women who jostled about, but they touched none of them. With consummate skill he guided her among the throng, sometimes lifting her feet clear off the floor as he spurned a congested spot.

It was a delirious sensation, one she would never forget. An exalted expression was on the face above hers. His eyes saw everything and nothing. There were times when his long hair stood out straight from his head like the mane of a leaping lion. Always a smile held his lips.

It happened to Dora then, the most important emotional moment of her life, although she never recognized it, nor thought of it at the time. Nothing else mattered but that she was in his arms, swept along with a lightness and grace that left her heart beating like the pulsations of a partridge wing. Time was as nothing at all. She gladly would have spent eternity without a change. She did not notice that all the other dancers had gradually quit and drawn off to watch her and Shane. She came back to earth only when a man bulked through the door and

blocked their progress across the dance floor.

Bert Bristow stood partly bent over, long arms swinging and lips moving without sound. Shane Cody put Dora behind him and faced the large man. The smile had not left his lips, but there was ice in his eyes.

"I followed you," rasped Bristow, at last able to make a sound. "You tempted her, fetched her to a den of iniquity." A long arm reached out. "You come with me, Dora."

"No!" she cried, and drew back.

"Don't touch her!" warned Shane Cody calmly.

"Give her back!"

BRISTOW lunged out at Cody with a clenched fist. Shane Cody bent his head and let the blow whistle past.

"Kill the big ox!" shrieked some women in the hall.

"You'd better leave, Bristow," said Shane. "Your lily-white soul might be blighted."

"Damn you, Cody! I seen your eyes when you was looking at her tonight. That's why I followed you. But you ain't never gettin' her, hear? I'm breaking you to bits with my hands."

He lunged again. This time Shane Cody caught the thick wrist with both hands. He whirled and put a shoulder under the man's breast bone, and heaved. Bristow went into the air, heels whistling, and came to the floor with a thump that raised a cloud of dust and shook all the breath from his lungs. Shane bent down, picked him up and threw him out the doorway into the street.

"We'll go now," he said to Dora, and guided her from the place.

"He'll make trouble," she whispered as they hurried down the street.

"I'm sorry to have something like this happen. I meant to take you out of there after we'd had a dance, and back to the wagons. There was no harm in it."

"No more harm than wild geese flying," she said. Holding tightly to his hand, she went on, "And I'll never forget it, Shane. You've given me something tonight, something no one can take away."

Cash Graham was poking about the wagons when they reached them. He held up a lantern and let the light fall across

their faces.

"Been looking all over for you," he said to Dora. "Where you been?"

"I took her uptown," said Shane Cody. "We had a dance together."

"Dance!" Graham lowered the lantern to the ground. "You took her to one of those hell-holes yonder?"

"There was no harm in it," Cody repeated.

Dora heard her father's breath come swiftly. "I'm the best judge of that!" he snapped. "My daughter does not go to such places of her own will. She knows my feelings about dancing. You'd better get out of here, Cody, before I lose my temper completely. I won't need you for the trail."

"Perhaps," said Shane. "I'll get out, of course." He turned to Dora. "Remember the wild geese calling," he said softly, and strode off through the darkness.

"Wild geese!" snorted her father. "Is he drunk? What does he mean by that?"

"Something you could never understand," she replied and left him, to seek shelter in one of the wagons.

A SHORT time later she heard Bristow came back, heard his angry explanations to her father. Then silence settled over their river camp. But sleep was long in coming to her, for her mind was occupied with the events of the evening. Her father was an upright man, honest and sincere in his beliefs. Bert Bristow was playing upon these virtues for a purpose, for he was anything but righteous himself, Dora knew.

Then her thoughts turned to Shane Cody and again her heart beat faster. She listened closely for the wild call of geese above the river, but heard none. Would she see Shane again?

It still was dark when they cooked breakfast there at the camp. The east had flushed gray and crimson when the three wagons started up the long, slanting trail toward the first bench above the river. Cash Graham drove the first wagon, Bristow the second and she brought up the rear. The heavy reins of the six-horse team bruised her softened hands, and dust rolled back over her in clouds.

It was after noon when they came to a steep descent, where the rutted trail led downward into a sharp ravine, the

far side of which marked the first approach to the higher hills. Cash Graham sent his team down, brakes squealing and harness clattering. Bristow followed, using his strength upon the reins as well as upon the brake. The result was a tangle at the bottom in which a horse went down and was dragged for yards.

Bristow was kicking at the animal when a buckskin pony appeared beside Dora's wagon. The rider looped reins over his saddle-horn and leaped to the wagon seat.

"Shane!" Dora cried.

Lifting her aside, he took the reins from her hands and pressed his foot against the brake bar.

"Let's go," he said.

Six horses are no better than two when it comes to holding back a heavy wagon. In fact, the extra four are a liability, for they must be kept far enough in front to avoid a tangle. Shane Cody allowed for this and the result was that all six horses were lengthened out as the wagon slipped over the edge and started downward. He stood with practically his whole weight again the brake bar, carefully balanced, chest muscles rippling under his leather jacket.

The wagon went down the trail much faster than the other two, but with less lurching and tipping. It swung around a sharp curve and over a ton of freight hovered above a sheer wall of sage and rock. The wagon wheels, breast high to an ordinary man, spun swiftly as the speed increased. The six horses were now at a lope, with Shane's buckskin running along beside them. They came to the bottom with a breath-taking swoosh and leveled out, to halt finally close behind Bristow's wagon. Bristow was staring at them, the dust on his face now mud as sweat mingled with it.

"There you are," Shane said calmly to Dora. "They should never have left you to come down a trail like this alone."

"You've been following?" she said.

"I've been around," he admitted. "I'll never be far from you, Dora. It's a long way to King's Bench and the trail's hard."

"My father is coming this way," she warned.

Shane Cody whistled sharply through his teeth, and the buckskin pony trotted up to the wagon. Shane touched her hand with his fingers and then leaped across

her to land in the saddle. He sat there looking down into the red and angry face of Cash Graham.

"You were told you weren't needed with this outfit, Cody, and I'll thank you to stay clear."

"You'd let a girl take a freight wagon down this hill alone, Graham. Where do you expect to get so much luck?"

"I was coming back to ride it with her."

Bert Bristow lumbered up. "Wasn't this here savage told to get out?" he demanded. He glared at Dora. "Bet you told him to meet you up here somewhere. Just like a silly female to—"

"Mind your tongue!" Shane said sharply.

"Who are you to talk, you horse thief? Yes, that pony you ride. I saw the owner of it down at Whiskey Point."

Shane Cody landed in the trail before the big man. His hand flicked out and cracked Bristow smartly across the mouth.

"I told you to mind your tongue," he said. "This buckskin happens to be mine, as the brand will show you. And if you say again that I'm a horse thief, I'll slit your dirty throat!"

He vaulted back into the saddle, lifted a hand to Dora and rode off.

BERT BRISTOW wiped a trickle of blood from his lips and muttered an oath. His heavy hand fell to the gun he carried and yanked it up. With a hasty aim he pulled the trigger, and dust spurted up under the hoofs of the departing buckskin.

"Stop that!" cried Cash Graham. "We don't want a killing to delay us now."

"I will kill him!" swore Bristow. "If he ever comes back I'll drill him smack through the heart."

Dora looked after Shane, who was loping off toward a rise without so much as a backward glance, which could mean nothing but contempt for Bert Bristow.

"If he ever comes back, and I think he will, you'd better keep your foul mouth shut," she advised the big man.

She saw her father's eyes upon her, questioning. His face turned a deep red.

"You encouraged him!" he declared. "You planned to meet up here."

"I thought of that only after we parted," she said, and turned her back upon him for the first time in her life.

That night Dora lay under thick blankets staring up through branches of jack-pine at a sky thickly studded with stars. Her arms ached from the long hours of driving, and she was weary enough to sleep, yet she couldn't. The only sound about the camp was the restless movements of the hobbled horses and the sodden snores of Bert Bristow. She kept thinking of Shane Cody, wondering where he was this cold night.

The answer to this came suddenly as a palm was pressed down over her forehead. A strand of hair fell across her face as lips were placed close to her ear.

"Shane," those lips murmured. "Don't speak above a whisper."

He had come to her as silently as the shadow of an eagle's flight. Her first tenseness vanished and she relaxed. It brought a strange comfort just to feel his face so close to hers.

"You drive the third wagon tomorrow," were his next words. "Keep behind the others."

"But they're sure to see you if you join me," she whispered.

"I won't join you, Dora."

There was silence after that. Only that long strand of hair against her cheek told her that he still was there. A dark bundle under the next wagon snorted and shifted position. Bristow. Then he snored again.

"Shane," she whispered, "why did you come down the river to meet the boat?"

"To see Cash Graham and arrange to help him with the freight."

"But you could have seen him after the boat arrived. It wasn't that alone. I think you were looking for someone."

"Yes," he said at length. "A man."

"An enemy?"

"And a killer, Dora." His body shifted ever so slightly. "Don't repeat what I tell you."

"No, Shane."

"I had a partner up at King's Bench. A month ago he started for Whiskey Point with our winter's catch of fur. He was to sell them and buy supplies."

"And he cheated you, never came back?"

"Not that. On the way in he was held up. The men got one pack-horse, but he managed to save the other. We lost over half of the furs. Then, on the way home,

they struck again and took all the supplies. My friend was wounded in the fight, but finally got back to our camp, where he died."

"Oh, Shane, I'm so sorry! Was he young?"

"Younger than me, with all life before him. A good boy, but they killed him. Before he died he told me of one man, the only one he could describe. That's the man I'm looking for. I thought perhaps he'd gone south with our furs and would be coming back on the boat. But he wasn't on the boat and not in Whiskey Point."

"Then you think—"

"I think he may be up here in the hills, waiting to steal more freight. That's why I want you in the back wagon, away from anything that may happen. But say nothing of this to Bristow or your father."

"But shouldn't they be warned?"

"If they knew they'd ride with weapons ready, and that would warn the man or men I want."

There was another period in which no whispers passed between them. Dora was thinking that the three wagons offered rich booty, for supplies meant life in this country. Outlying ranchers, struggling to make a start in this new country, would be glad to get supplies at reduced rates, and no questions asked.

"I'm going now," said Shane, "but I won't be far away from you."

She tipped back her head to look up into his face, unwittingly making a target of her lips. And Shane Cody didn't miss the target. Then he was gone as silently as he had come, leaving her a little breathless but totally unafraid.

III

DORA saw Shane twice the next day before noon, fleeting glimpses only but reassuring nevertheless. Both times he was high on a ridge above the trail, almost invisible against the background of yellow rock.

At noon the freighters paused beside a tumbling creek to eat a meal, and felt the cold of fresh snow surrounding them. This snow warned of harder going in Top Pass and left a frown of worry on Cash Graham's forehead. But Bristow was

more concerned with food than anything else, wolfing down his victuals as though he expected it to be his last meal on earth.

His manners were disgusting to Dora who, though used to men's ways in a new land, had certain standards. And the way he occasionally looked at her, bushy eyebrows drawing down like hairy tentacles, indicated his consuming thoughts.

The early spring sun was behind the western ridges when the wagons reached the foot of Top Pass. The trail ran along the bottom of a canyon for a mile or more, then began a steep ascent. Here the snow was heavier, and balled up on the huge wheels. Dora wondered if her father would camp here for the night or attempt to make a part of the pass while light still held. He seemed to be considering this, for he had halted his team and was staring ahead.

It was at this moment that Dora saw a movement on the bank above her. What had first seemed to be a large stump resolved itself into a man on horseback. He sat his saddle perfectly still, and with a gun leveled upon the wagon train below. Before she could open her mouth to call a warning, she saw her father stand up in the wagon ahead, his arms raising slowly. From behind a log beside the trail rose another man with weapon aimed.

"All right, Graham. Get down and tell the rest of your party to do the same." The voice came clearly in the confines of the canyon.

Graham put a foot on the rim of a wheel. Looking back over the wagon, he called to Bristow who was sitting as though frozen to the wagon seat. Then he turned to the man with the gun.

"If you need food I'll give it to you," he called. "But don't take freight that means the lives of them folks over yonder."

"No palaver!" growled the holdup man. "And don't none of you reach for a gun. I got a pard on the side hill yonder."

Dora saw a small clump of snow fall from a tree branch above the man's head. Then something came down from that branch that wasn't snow, something the tawny color of a cougar. It struck the armed man on the shoulders and carried him face down into the snow. An arm lifted and descended swiftly. There was no sound at all.

Shane Cody raced to the wagon and yanked a rifle from under the seat. He fired twice at the man on the slope above, clipping bark from trees as the robber rode madly along. Then he handed the gun back to Cash Graham and went to where the first man lay. Quickly he kicked snow over the form and sheathed his knife.

"That's one of them, anyhow," he said calmly. "The main one."

Cash Graham ran a shaking hand across his face. "You were up in that tree all the time?"

"Yes, I was waiting there. This seemed to be the logical place for a holdup."

"By heaven, you're more animal than man!" exclaimed Graham. "But you have my thanks, Shane Cody."

"I had my own purpose, Graham. This was one of the reasons I wanted to hire out to you. Robbery is getting common on this trail."

"Then you're in my pay from here on, man!"

Bristow came plowing forward through the snow. Graham pointed a finger at him.

"And you sat there like a dumb steer!" he bellowed. "You'd have let me be killed or robbed!"

"I was watching Cody up in the tree," Bristow said uneasily.

"Watching me? You never saw me at all. No man could see me."

"Get back to your wagon!" roared Graham. "We're going on to the first flat to make camp."

When Dora's wagon passed Shane he was standing beside the mound of snow. He gave her a faint smile and waved for her to proceed. And he still was there when a bend cut off her view.

It was a hard struggle for the six horses, and now and then she had to let them stop for a breather. When this happened she set the brake and found that it held. Not until after the third halt did she realize that Shane was behind her, blocking the wheels with a short log when the wagon stopped. The buckskin was following.

IT WAS dark when the wagon train reached the small flat a third of the way up Top Pass. The teams were unhitched and fed. Shane built a small fire and scooped away snow so that they could

eat with a little comfort. And then, when the meal was finished, Shane told Graham about his young partner. The dead man at the foot of the pass was the one the partner had described.

"I'm not blaming you," said Cash Graham when the story was finished. "Maybe my method wouldn't be the same, but I'd hope for the same result."

Dora sat beside Shane, near the arm that had lifted and fallen so swiftly. Bristow sat at the rim of light, staring sullenly into the dying embers.

"There's one man left," went on Graham. "Perhaps more. I'll be glad of your help, Shane Cody."

Bristow got to his feet. "You keeping on this—this killer, Cash?"

"Glad to. We need him."

"But we're warned now. We'll be prepared for it next time."

"You had a gun handy," reminded Graham. "There was no weapon pointed at your gizzard. But you didn't do anything."

"I'd as soon have a slitherin' snake in my camp as him," Bristow insisted stubbornly.

"And I'd appreciate it if you shut up!" roared Graham. "Now let's turn in so's we can get an early start."

The wind was cold across that mountain flat where they camped, but Dora felt warm beneath her blankets. Shane had scraped away the ashes of the fire and made her bed on the warm ground. And now he lay there not far distant, a mighty comforting assurance. Somewhere beyond was Bert Bristow, restless, turning this way and that.

Dora didn't know how long she had been asleep when she heard a low command:

"Come." It was Shane.

She sat up and looked about. It was still dark, but the wind had died away. He took her arm and lifted her up, led her silently from the camp and off across the trail. Here he put her on the buckskin's back and picked up the bridle reins. They began to climb, wending their way among the trees and around deeply drifted snow. Her first chill disappeared and she wanted to ask him the purpose of this strange journey.

He led on until, at last, they rounded the bare bosom of a peak and came to the

east side of it. The east was graying even then and, while he paused, turned pink. He came to stand beside her, one arm lifted. Below them was a vast gulf thick with tumbling mist. The crest of it followed the color of the east. And then the sun burst above the horizon like a huge ball of fire, turning the mist to a crimson sea. Dora caught her breath, for it was the most magnificent spectacle she had ever seen.

"Oh, Shane," she cried. "It's so beautiful, so still, so big."

"I thought you'd like it," he said and nodded. "I've seen it before, many times, and I've always wanted to sail out over it."

"Like wild geese!"

He nodded again. "Yonder, far below, is the river. It winds like a little thread torn from a silk dress. It's mighty and powerful, yet it can't come up here. We think we're mighty, we humans, and yet we can't spread wing and sail out over it."

He stared at the mounting red ball of sun. Minutes passed in silence. Then he turned the horse abruptly and started back around the peak.

"We don't want to see it change to something less beautiful," he told her.

Half an hour later they crossed the trail to the camp where light was just beginning to reveal the wagons. Cash Graham stood there, and Bert Bristow. Both just stood there, waiting.

"Yah!" jeered Bristow. "What'd I tell you, Cash? Been off somewhere together in the night. What you think about it now?"

Cash Graham folded his arms across his chest. He nodded to Shane and his daughter.

"Begin," he said.

"Shane took me to a peak to see the sun rise," said Dora. "It was the most glorious sight I ever saw. We've been gone about an hour."

"That's what she says!" sneered Bristow.

"And it's true!" declared Dora hotly.

"Yeah? Well, he lured you off to that dance, didn't he? And he sneaked you out of camp just to—"

Shane stepped before the man. He looked into Bristow's eyes carefully.

"Yes, you're thinking it," he decided.

"I know it! An hour, you say. I saw

you leave right after midnight."

"You're a lying hog, Bristow!"

SHANE struck once, hard and clean. Bristow went over backward to thrust head and shoulders into a bank of snow. He came up spluttering and clawing and saw the point of Shane's knife not far from his throat.

"When did we leave camp?" Shane asked coldly.

"I—I don't know."

Shane whirled upon Cash Graham. "What do you want to believe?" he snapped.

Wonder upon wonders, Cash Graham was smiling. "You needn't ask me, Shane Cody. Here's my hand."

Bert Bristow ate no breakfast. While the rest sat about the cooking fire he slapped harness on horses and hitched them to the wagons. Nor did he have a word for any of them as the upward journey was resumed. As usual he rode the middle wagon, lashing at his team when it threatened to bog down. Shane took over the last wagon, relieving Dora of the strain.

It was impossible at times to make more than a hundred yards without pausing to rest the horses. In places where the trail had been cut out of shale rock the snow had drifted belly deep. It was in one of these places shortly before noon that Bristow drove too near the edge and let his off horses lose footing. They went down and slid from the trail until only the tangle of harness saved them from hurtling to the bottom of the rimming ravine.

Shane blocked his wagon and ran forward. Cash Graham came back.

"You drive like a fool!" he yelled at Bristow. "All the way up you've been lashing the team, wearing them out. And now look!"

"Don't shout at me!" stormed the man. "You give me the heaviest load and the poorest team. And I suppose it's my fault there was a storm to make the trail bad!"

"Lend us a hand," said Graham.

It took more than an hour to get the three horses back to the trail. They were so worn and nervous that Graham said they must rest another hour before going on. He looked upward to where gray clouds scudded across the peaks, and shook his head. It was possible there

would be more snow before night, and they were not much more than halfway to the top of the pass.

Dora was shivering when the journey was resumed, and she uttered a little gasp of dismay when a wet flake struck her cheek.

"If it snows hard we'll never make it," she said to Shane.

"Sure we will," he comforted. "If we have to we'll snake one wagon up at a time, even unload some of the freight." He cast an eye upward. "But it won't snow too much. I don't feel it in the air."

This did comfort her, for she had unbounded faith in his knowledge of the elements. Bristow was driving more sanely now, not, she thought, because of his feelings for the horses, but because he wanted no more of the hard work entailed in getting horses back to the trail. It took the hardships of such a trail to bring out the true caliber of a man, and Bert Bristow was proving himself a brute.

"Once he threatened to kill you," she said with a nod toward the wagon ahead. "The time when you were leaving, and he shot at you."

Shane Cody smiled and, as though this were an invitation, the sun broke through the clouds and warmed them.

"I've lived with smarter animals than him," he told Dora. "He's big and clumsy, like a bear."

There was no pause at noon, for Cash Graham wanted to take advantage of the clearing weather. But the continual effort brought a halt before sundown when they were still a mile or more from the top. The teams were done in.

IV

WHILE the other two men cared for the horses, Shane scraped snow and built up a fire. It seemed to Dora that he did everything easily and quickly. Bristow still was sullen, eating his food a short distance from the fire and saying nothing. The only time the dour expression on his face changed was when he glanced at Shane, and those glances contained nothing but undying hate.

After the meal he called Cash Graham to one side. Their conversation began in low tones but quickly rose until the two by the fire could hear.

"It's either him or me, Cash. I ain't stayin' on if he rides with us."

"You're making a damned fool of yourself, Bert," was Graham's reply. "Cody is a good man, and I need him now."

"Just the same, he leaves or I do!"

"And just how do you expect to leave? Want to walk all the way back to King's Bench? You desert me now and I'll spread your name all over the country as a dirty quitter."

"And I'll tell that you took up with a danged savage who lured your own daughter—"

"That's enough!" broke in Graham. "Mind your tongue, Bert."

Dora whispered in Shane's ear, "How I hate him!"

With darkness Shane fashioned a bed for her, again scraping away the dying embers and spreading her blankets on the warm ground. With the sky clearing the wind had picked up and was sweeping across the peaks. It swooped down over the camp in icy blasts, shaking the snow from the limbs of the trees above them.

Dora tried to sleep, but her thoughts and the rushing sound of the wind prevented. She lay there staring at a bundle not twenty feet from her. Shane had rolled into a single blanket and she wondered how he could keep warm.

Time dragged on. Off to one side the horses stood with heads together and backs humped to the biting wind. Now and then one of them snorted restlessly. She closed her eyes and drew a blanket end over her head. It was then she felt a slight jar on the ground. Peering out, she saw a dark hulk standing over Shane Cody. Her heart all but stopped.

Bert Bristow moved slightly and lifted an arm. There was something in his hand—a club or a gun. It was as though he were trying to determine which end of the bundle was Shane's head. Dora opened her mouth to call out a warning, but her tongue seemed to stick against the roof of her mouth. With a frantic movement she threw aside the blanket—just as the weapon descended.

"There, damn you!" cried Bristow hoarsely.

"What's on your mind, Bristow?" came a voice from around a nearby tree trunk. "Want to borrow my blanket?"

Dora sank back in her blankets. Shane

was standing near a tree. Relief warmed her, sent her blood coursing swiftly.

Bristow had whirled with an oath. He stood there for a moment and then, muttering under his breath, stamped off toward the horses. Shane was chuckling when he came to Dora's side. She caught his hand.

"Oh, Shane, he meant to kill you."

"I saw it in his face at supper time. You can just about tell what a bear is going to do by the way he grunts. But we won't mention this to your father. No use adding to his worries."

"But Bert may try it again, Shane! And where has he gone now?"

"I'll trail him after a bit. He's stupid, but he's got more sense than to start off somewhere on foot. You rest easy."

Shane vanished among the trees. When he was gone she lay there listening to the wind and the restless stamping of the horses. After a time she slept, and was awakened only when the crackle of a new fire seeped through her weariness. Shane was making ready for breakfast. Her father and Bristow were harnessing the horses.

What had happened during the rest of that night? She didn't learn until they were on the trail again.

"He started off like he meant to walk on to the Bench," Shane told her. "But he made only a mile or so before he met a man."

"Met a man?" Dora repeated in surprise.

"The man who has been trailing us ever since the ambush at the foot of the pass. I've known it and been watching all the time."

"The man you shot at! But why did Bristow meet him? Do you suppose—"

"That Bristow was in cahoots with them? I don't know that for sure. Their meeting may have been pure chance. Maybe the man has guessed that Bristow is mad about something. Anyway, they met. I trailed in close enough to read the tracks in the snow. They had quite a confab."

"We've got to tell Father about it!"

"No," he checked her. "Cash is concerned with getting over the pass. You noticed how meek Bristow seemed this morning? Well, it means that something is up. But I'll be on the watch for what-

ever it is they've cooked up."

"Here's the top of the pass!" she exclaimed. "Now it will be easier going."

"In some respects, yes, but we've got to keep the wagons from sliding off the edge on the way down. If this wagon starts to tip over, you jump off the high side."

She looked at him. "Maybe Bristow plans to let his wagon go over. That would cause delay and give the other man a chance."

"I'm watching Bristow," Shane said grimly.

CASH GRAHAM stood up in his wagon and waved a triumphant hand as he dipped over the top of the pass and started downward. An expert driver, he hugged the high side of the trail, taking advantage of the drifted snow, making it hold his wheels. Bert Bristow followed the same plan, driving carefully at all times, which caused Shane Cody to think along new lines. It was evident that the man was determined to get his load safely to the bottom. Because of plans to take over when the freight was in a more accessible spot?

The north side of Top Pass was much shorter than the south. But the grade was steeper and there were more curves. The wagons were kept well spaced so that in case of accident only one would be involved. As they went lower the cold wind subsided and the protecting trees grew thicker. By mid-afternoon they came to the bottom where there was little snow and where a small creek tumbled along. Graham did not halt, but wheeled on along the fairly level ground, aiming at a meadow which would afford good camping for the night.

"Twenty miles more and we're home," he told them when they did make camp. "Another day and we'll be in. We can make it from here on if you want to cut off toward your place at the far edge of the Bench, Cody."

"I'll stick it out," was Shane's brief reply.

When Dora had him alone she asked, "You think something will happen before we get in?"

"Things are going too smooth," he said with a nod. "Bristow has something on his mind."

"I'm glad you're not leaving," she murmured, "although I know you must be anxious to get back to your ranch."

"It isn't much of a ranch yet, Dora. Only a shack and a shed. My cattle are few now, but I've room for lots more."

She waited for him to go on, but he seemed more interested in Bristow who was leading the horses across the creek to a wide and greening meadow.

"Do you think he'll meet that other man again?" she asked.

"Perhaps. I'm going to do some prowling tonight and make sure the other man is around. You see, Dora, I still have a score to settle with that fellow."

Dora thought of the other man, the main one, Shane had called him, who now lay buried in the snow at the south end of Top Pass. Was Shane planning to kill this second man? Strange that the thought did not bring to her apprehension or revulsion. They had robbed and killed his young partner, and in this new country such things as speedy justice were not left in the hands of the slow-moving law.

She never knew when Shane left the camp that night. As a matter of fact, she thought he had changed his mind, for every time she opened her eyes in the darkness she saw the bundle on the ground not far distant. It was warmer here below the pass, with a scent of freshly growing things in the air.

Her mind drifted off to her homecoming, the sight of their log store and house. She was not eager to resume the slow and dull life that had been hers up to two months past. In the privacy of her own bed of blankets she let her thoughts steal to a more exciting life, a life at the far edge of King's Bench. She knew that with Shane Cody there could be no dull moments. Wild geese calling!

There was no fire burning the next morning when she awakened. Cash Graham stood beside the bundle scratching his head. Shane Cody was not rolled up in the blanket.

"Beats me," he confessed. "He ain't here, and it don't look as though he'd been here at all. Horse is gone, too." He looked at Dora. "Reckon he scooted out on us, after all, and went home?"

"I don't think so," she replied. "I think he went out last night to try and find the other man, the second one who got away

at the foot of the pass. That man has been following us."

"Thunderation! Why didn't Shane say something to me about it?"

"He didn't want to worry you with it."

Graham stared about. "Where is Bristow?" he asked.

Bristow wasn't in the camp. An examination of his bed showed that he hadn't slept there at all. Dora's heart jerked. Had Bristow followed Shane and ambushed him somewhere? No, she told herself. Bristow wasn't smart enough for that.

"Well," said her father, "I might as well fetch in the horses. Maybe those two will show up soon. You start some breakfast, Dora."

BUT Cash Graham was back from the meadow before she could prepare any food. His face was flushed and anger filled his eyes.

"The horses are gone!" he reported. "All gone but one. Somebody stole the lot of them." His face darkened still more. "Bristow! I'll bet anything he did it. He's been mad about Cody ever since we started, and now he's getting even by stealing my teams. Left me stranded twenty miles from home, damn his dirty black heart!"

"And I think that's where Shane has gone—to trail him."

Graham's lips thinned. "Pretty keen, that Shane," he declared. "You like him, Dora?"

She took a firm grip on her courage. "It's more than that, Dad."

"So! Well, I ain't saying I blame you, girl. He's a little wild in his actions, but a man for all that. Maybe his code ain't the same as mine, but sometimes morals are a matter of opinion."

"Morals are in the heart and Shane Cody's heart is clean."

At that moment the buckskin swung into the trail behind them. Shane rode forward and swung to the ground. His glance went from one to another, and read something wrong.

"You didn't catch him?" asked Cash Graham.

"Meaning the second holdup man? No. I've had no sight of him."

"Shane," said Dora, "Bristow is gone and so are our horses."

"Took all but one," put in Graham.

Shane slapped his thigh. "Fooled me!" he exclaimed. "I'm not so smart, after all. I've been searching the east country for them and all the time they've been on the other side of the creek."

Cash Graham ran to his wagon and got his rifle.

"They've teamed up!" he declared. "Took the horses so we can't go on, and while we're stuck here they'll raid us!"

Shane Cody squatted down and began drawing aimless patterns in the soft earth. Once he lifted head and stared across the creek at the empty meadow.

"Took all but one horse, eh? That means something."

"It doesn't mean that Bristow has a soft spot in his heart," said Dora quickly.

"No," said Shane. He looked at her and then at Graham who stood with the rifle clenched in his hands. "There's more to this than the goods in those wagons. That horse was left for one purpose. Understand?"

Graham shook his head angrily. "But I do know they'll get a hot welcome when they come."

"They don't expect us to be here when they come. I have my buckskin, and the other horse was left for you, Cash. What would be more natural than for you and me to start after them, trail the horses? And that means Dora would be left behind. That's what Bristow wants."

"So! I believe you're right, Shane. They'd double back and—"

"It would mean that you'd have to talk turkey. Once Bristow has Dora you'll be helpless, and even then it wouldn't mean she'd be safe."

"By the holies, there'll be law in this country one of these days!"

"There's law here now, Cash. It's the law of life and self-preservation, and the authority is a man's heart. We ride."

"But you said that's what they want us to do."

"The way to turn a trick is to fall for a trap, but never get into it." He turned to Dora and smiled reassuringly. "You won't mind being the bait for an hour or so?"

Dora felt absolutely sure that Shane would never let Bristow get his hands on her.

"Not at all," she replied. Her head lifted defiantly. "I'll sit on the seat of a wagon where they can see me."

"Good! Cash, pick up a bridle and come with me."

V

GOING to the wagon nearest at hand, Dora climbed to the seat. She watched Shane and her father ford the creek and go on to the pasture. They caught up the one remaining horse and, side by side, started on. Shane, she could see, was studying the tracks of the stolen horses, but before he vanished into the willows at the far side of the meadow he turned in the saddle and waved.

During the next few moments she felt terribly alone. There was no sound except the distant tumbling of the creek, and after days of creaking wheels and straining horses the silence bore heavily upon her. She saw sunlight stream across the meadow and filter through the willows. Her eyes held to that spot where she had last seen Shane and her father. There was no movement over there now.

How far off was Bristow? Had he been watching when the two men left? Or was he waiting in hiding, watching the horse trail for them to pass? Numberless conjectures passed through her mind as she waited, and that waiting was hard.

It was more than an hour later that she caught a faint sound coming from the south. Snow had not fallen at this lower altitude, but the trail was soft enough to muffle hoofs. She listened intently. The sound came again—the squeak of leather. And then she heard a hoof in the soft trail. Resting on her knees, she peered over the back of the wagon.

Two men were riding in along the trail, and at first she could catch but intermittent glimpses of them. But presently she saw the leader, who was a stranger. He stood up in the stirrups with head twisting this way and that. Behind him rode Bert Bristow, his mount one of the wagon horses. He carried a rifle which he held high and ready.

Dora's mouth was suddenly dry and her heart began to thump.

Opposite the wagons they turned off the trail and came forward. Dora sat primly on the seat with fingers laced to prevent any outward sign of her nervousness. Her eyes were above the two men, searching the trees along the trail. Shane should be

out there somewhere. He must be out there!

The stranger, a thick-set man, halted his horse at the wagon tongue and dismounted.

"Well, ma'am," he said, "just settin' here waitin' for us, eh? Mighty nice of you."

"No palaver!" growled Bristow. "Fetch her here to me and we'll be on our way."

"There's no rush, my friend. Remember, I haven't eaten in two days and I want to rustle a little grub out of this wagon." He climbed to the seat and bent over Dora. "Right purty little piece, ain't you? No wonder Bristow is so set on having you. How about a kiss for me, eh?"

"None of that!" warned Bristow. "It ain't in our bargain. You get your grub."

Dora leaned back from the man as he crawled over the seat and lifted the edge of the tarp which covered the supplies behind. This was more than she had expected. She had never thought they would get so close. The man's heel with its rusty spur was close to her side. She thought of seizing his foot and jerking him backward, but something told her to wait, not take any chances.

She heard him grunt as he tried to pry the lid from a box. Then he grunted again, this time a different sort of sound. As he pitched head-first among the boxes the sharp spang of a rifle shot echoed across the trail.

For the space of a second Bert Bristow sat frozen on the back of his horse. Then he dived to the ground and scrambled wildly for the shelter of the wagon. Dora stared across the trail, but saw nothing. But Shane was there somehow, she knew. He had neatly picked off the man on the wagon.

Below her, Bristow was peering through the wheels, lips parted and breath coming quickly.

"You don't see him, do you?" she taunted. "But he's there!"

Bristow growled deep down in his throat and rested the rifle on a wagon spoke. Minutes dragged by without another sound. Dora tried to think what Shane would be doing now. Would he still be there, or was he creeping up? Perhaps he was circling. It came to her that she might help by working on Bristow's nerves, by keeping him disturbed.

"He's nearer now," she informed the

man. "You'll never see him, but he's getting closer."

"Shut up!" he snapped at her.

"Maybe you'd better make a run for it," she suggested. "Your horse stands just yonder. Or you could back up to the creek."

"Quit talking, will you?"

"Why? I've been here alone for over an hour, just waiting for you, Bristow. You thought that Shane Cody was fooled, didn't you? Well, he wasn't. He knew why you left that one horse in the meadow. He knew you wanted him and my father to trail the other horses, so you could come back here."

BRISTOW spared her one glance and she saw hate and fear in his eyes. But she wasn't prepared for his sudden move. Reaching up, he grasped her arm and, with a savage jerk, hauled her from the wagon seat. She struck the ground near his feet and was partly stunned by the fall. Before she could recover her breath he had pulled her to her feet beside him.

"Stand still!" he commanded.

Resting there against the wagon wheel, she realized that she had gone too far, taunted him too much. By being there beside him she was making it too difficult for Shane. It would be risky shooting through the spokes.

"Now let him come!" said Bristow. He lifted his voice. "Hear me, Cody? I've got Dora here, and if you try anything I'll bash in her head!" There was no sound, no movement out there beside the trail. "Let me get to the horse with her and she'll be all right."

"Don't think I'd go with you," she said quickly.

"You're going, sooner or later," he said, and swore.

"Not with you, Bert Bristow. You'll never leave this camp alive."

She brushed soft earth from a bruised elbow. As she did this she caught just a brief flash of something yellow south of the wagon. When she looked again there was nothing there but the trees. But she knew now that Shane was making a circle. Stooping down, she fastened her eyes to the east, peering under the bed of the wagon. She held the position so long that Bristow began to breathe faster. He

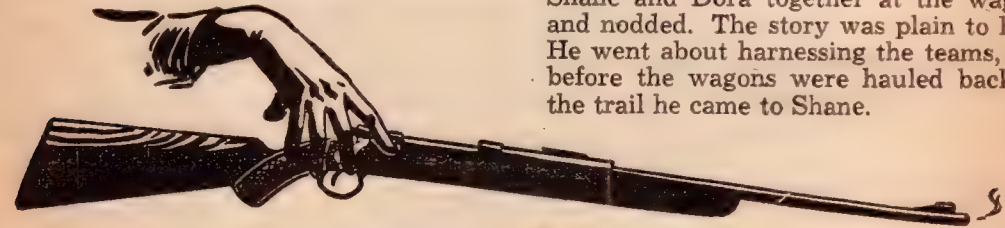
nestled the stock of the rifle against his hairy cheek.

"He's coming," she murmured. "You can't see him but he's out there and coming this way. Remember how he got the man at the foot of the pass?"

"I ain't that easy," said Bristow, as though he needed his own assurance.

Dora held her position. She must keep his attention in that direction at all costs, so Shane could make his advance from the rear. She thought of the distance and tried to time him. Had Shane reached the wagon next to this one? She thought she heard a slight sound. To cover it she poked a pointing finger through the wagon wheel. Bristow tensed.

In those moments her heart beat ten times to the second. She strained every nerve, every sense to catch some warning, some vibration. It came to her as a streamer of fire racing up her spine, and she knew the time was right. Her tense



muscles uncoiled and sent her swiftly from Bristow's side toward the front of the wagon.

"Damn you!"

Bristow pulled the gun from the wheel and turned it upon her. This put his back to the rear of the wagon, and it was then that Shane Cody launched himself through the air. But the distance was great and something had warned Bristow. He wheeled sharply and met the charge breast on.

Both men went down, the force of the collision knocking Shane partly under the wagon and the gun from Bristow's hand. He reached for it, but Dora kicked out and sent it beyond his reach. The light glittered on something in Shane's hand. With a grunt of fear Bristow leaped to his feet and ran toward the creek, fumbling under his belt for a six-gun tucked under the leather.

Shane was following swiftly, covering ground in great leaps. He caught up with the man at the bank of the creek, just as

Bristow whirled with lifted gun. Straight through the air Shane flew, feet first, and Bristow was knocked backward into the water as though struck by a falling boulder. Dora saw an arm rise and fall. Then she sat down on the wagon tongue and covered her face with her hands and shivered violently.

When she looked up Shane was shaking clean water from his hands. There was a smile upon his lips as he nodded.

"Yonder," he said, "near the big pine beside the trail, is a small patch of sunlight, and in that sunlight some new violets are growing. Perhaps you'd better pick them, Dora."

She went to him, looked into his face, then moved on toward the trail. She knew that when she returned all signs of the conflict would be gone.

CASH GRAHAM came in with the horses shortly before noon. He saw Shane and Dora together at the wagon, and nodded. The story was plain to him. He went about harnessing the teams, but before the wagons were hauled back to the trail he came to Shane.

"We'll be home sometime this night, Shane. You'll drive a wagon in for me, of course."

"Sure, Cash."

"And after that—well, I can use you, son, in my business. You'll stay on with us?"

Shane Cody shook his head. "It's not for me, Cash. I couldn't stay indoors that way. I belong over yonder at the far side of the Bench. I don't have much yet, but the chances are good." He looked at Dora. "As I told you," he said to her, "I've only a shack there now, but I'm aiming to build a better abode. When I've done that, will you come to me?"

"I'll go with you now, Shane." She moved to his side and looked up into his face. "Do wild geese expect to find a nest all built for them when they arrive at the lagoon? No, Shane—they build it together."

"Together," he echoed, and the light in his eyes made her heart leap. • • •



THINGS HAPPEN IN THREES

By BARRY SCOBEE

THE first thing Norman Waldie did when he got out of bed was to step to the porch of his ranchhouse for a squint at the sky.

For ten months it had not rained enough in this Southwestern short-grass country to put a wet shine on the rocks. But in the last few days the Little People seemed to

have been talking it over. Already now before sunup there was a fish-belly haze around the skirts of the sky and the August heat was still and heavy. And cows were about the well in the nearest pasture lowing plaintively for feed and water, and with the undertone of apprehension that Waldie knew animals some-

You Can Keep Counting but Sometimes Nothing Adds Up!

times felt when their instinct warned them of a coming storm.

Maybe it'd rain and save his hide, and his ranch, Waldie thought. Maybe.

Going back into the house he kindled a fire in the kitchen stove. In lifting a stick of wood he dropped it end-down on his bare toes. It was heavy and it hurt. He danced about on one foot, red-faced and cussing a little.

That's the first one, he thought, and wondered what the next two unlucky accidents would be.

For he knew that things happened in series of threes, each of the three about equally important or trivial. The next one came along promptly. In his worried absent-mindedness he got too much fuel in the stove. It set the soot on fire in the chimney. Apprehensive that a spark might set blaze to the drought-dry shingles he ran out with a pail of water and climbed a ladder that was ready for the purpose. That was incident number two, as he saw it. Number three was that while he was on the roof, the breakfast biscuits burned to a crisp in the over-heated oven.

Now, he knew, a new series would start. It did. He broke a tine out of a fork in gouging the goody out of a burned biscuit. He tore his shirt sleeve from cuff to elbow by catching it on a tendril of wire when he entered the corral. This vexed him so that he lost his temper, jerked his bridle from a peg, and broke the rein.

HE RODE to the near pasture with his last sack of cottonseed cake-feed behind the saddle. All his stock should be fed but he had only enough feed left for this bunch of rack-o-bone cows. Last Saturday in town he had asked old Roundtree, the money lender who held a mortgage on the ranch, for more money to buy feed to see him through the drought. "Dad" Roundtree had cocked a speculative eye at him.

"I'll come out to your ranch in two-three days and look things over," he answered finally.

"He'll likely be here today," Waldie told himself savagely, and that'll be the first of three big unlucky happenings—the first big bad wolf to bite me today, with two more to come and snap out a chunk of meat.

The windmill had stripped its gears in

a sudden puff of wind days before and Waldie had to draw water with a bucket for these cows. He was sloshed wet with the long chore when Dad Roundtree came jogging up in his one-horse buggy about the middle of the forenoon.

"Well, son, how are all the good little raindrops?" Dad asked jokingly as his cramped knees got him out of the buggy.

Waldie grinned and thumbed skyward. "Still in heaven," he said, and Dad chuckled.

Dad nodded at the gaunt and bawling cows. "So this is what you want money for to buy more feed for—to get more cattle to buy more feed for?"

Waldie shrugged. "No grass left," he said. "The rest of my cattle have got to eat too. It'll take a lot of feed if it doesn't rain and make grass."

The tall, bony old-timer of the ranch country shook a doleful head.

"Norman, if this dry spell keeps on long enough, your stuff will eat more feed than you could ever sell them for to pay me back. I hate to say this, Norm, but I'm betwixt the idee of letting you have a leetle more money, on a chance it'll rain, or closing you out. It's not my money, Norm. I'm just the local agent for a money corporation. I got to use judgment."

So this was it, Waldie told himself. This was the first bad one of three. Not much use to argue, to fight it. Dad was a man who meant what he said. He found Dad staring at him quizzically. He decided to make one little try, anyhow.

"It's going to rain," he said. "Look at the sky." His arm bent around the yellowish-green, ugly-hazed horizon. "Going to rain pitchforks. It'll make grass."

"I've seen it like this before and it didn't rain till Christmas," Dad retorted. "So have you."

Waldie's wet, work-thickened hand gripped a board of the fence that enclosed the well. He'd try another angle. If it didn't work, to the devil with it. He'd let the Threes have it.

"There ain't so awful much debt against my land," he said. "I could feed all my stuff six months more and the land would more than take care of the bill, if you had to foreclose."

"It ain't the land I'm afraid of," Dad said, keeping his faded but shrewd old eyes on Waldie.

"Afraid of me, Dad? Shucks, I'm not a man to brag about myself, but I'm a good worker. I go from morning till night. I don't loaf in town; only go for my mail, and to buy groceries to keep boots and body together."

"But that isn't the way it ought to be, Norm. All work and no play makes Jumbo a hopeless elephant. You're a young man. You ought to go to dances. You ought to get yourself a wife and family. But you've never got ahead enough to take on what you'd call a burden."

"I don't know why I can't get ahead," Waldie said wearily. "Of course I have my share of bad luck."

"That's it! It's your superstitions, your blasted worrying about 'em, that I'm afraid of. You're always looking for something bad to happen instead of something good. Preparing for it. It keeps you from taking healthy risks."

DAD'S remarks irritated the younger man.

"Superstitions!" Waldie yelled. "Me? Why, you old fossil, Dad! Doggone it, I'm not superstitious. I don't believe in ghosts. I don't take any stock in black cats. Or walking under ladders. Or Friday, the thirteenth. Like Mark Twain, the only thirteen I believe in, is that it's unlucky to sleep in bed with thirteen people. I don't knock on wood."

"Careful!" Dad warned. He rapped his knuckles against the board fence around the well, and chuckled at himself. "No, Norm, not those things. But how about you believing things happen in threes?"

"Why, that's not superstition," said Waldie in vast surprise. "That's plumb mathematics. Lots of folks know it. I could show it to you forty times a day."

"Hoot, mon!" Dad jeered. "Change your arithmetic and they'd happen in twos, or fours, or sevens, or any other grouping."

"But they don't," Waldie declared. "I can prove it."

"All right, all right!" Dad turned away with a shrug. "It hurts to have your pet superstition tramped on, don't it? You finish your watering while I rest my old joints in the buggy."

Waldie resumed his dropping and lifting of the heavy pail in and out of the well. The well was walled with rocks. Some of them stuck out. In his dismal thinking

that Dad's presence was big adverse event number one he let the bucket catch on one of the rocks near the top and tilt and spill water all over the platform.

"Now see that," he called over the crowding cows. "Two more things about like that will happen. You watch."

Two more did. A cow caught her horn in the bucket pail and jerked the draw-rope from Waldie's hands. He had to push among the animals to retrieve the pail. He grinned at the old man and called out, "Number two." Then he slipped on the wet platform and sat down. He shouted, "Number three!" Presently a sudden puff of wind whirled the windmill and a monkey wrench, which he had forgotten and left aloft, fell down and narrowly missed his noggin.

"Number one!" he called to Dad. "The next one will probably hit me."

"Number four!" Dad Roundtree disputed. "Next one's number five. Finish your watering and let's get in and make dinner. I'm lankier than your cows."

Waldie outdid himself trying to get up a good dinner for the money lender. But it was love's labor lost. For Dad was so sunk in his thinking that he paid no attention to what he was eating.

"That monkey wrench," he burst out in the middle of a buttered biscuit with honey. "How come you left it up on the windmill? If it had fell in the well you'd have lost a good wrench. If it had hit you, I would've had to bury you out there by myself, like as not."

Waldie shook his head ruefully.

"I durn near fell off of that windmill twice when I was trying to unbolt the gear," he confessed. "I needed both hands to climb down with, so I left the wrench."

"Sure. Afraid of a third happening. Afraid you'd fall. So you left the wrench and forgot about it. Right?"

"Reckon so."

"So it made an incident today. Through your own fault, Norman. Because you were afraid of a third happening the other day. You see what I mean, don't you? Huh?"

"Suppose so."

"Now we're getting somewheres, son. Let's go back to last January. You was delivering a dozen three-year-old steers. Dry lightning cracked in the sky and struck and killed two of the animals when

they were crowding against a wire fence. You called that number one happening, didn't you?"

"Yep," said Waldie.

The old man continued: "So when that new corporation ranch was making up in March and wanted to buy forty head of your cows for stockers at a good price, you to deliver 'em, you was afraid to sell 'em and move 'em. Wasn't you? You was afraid of the lightning, or some other calamity would hit them. Wasn't you? Don't tell me you wasn't. Huh?"

"That's so," Waldie conceded, half truculently.

ROUNDTREE grinned, then squinted his old eyes into shrewd slits. "Had you sold them you would have unloaded some of your salable stock and eased up on your already short grass. But you've still got them. You fed some of those cows out there today with your last cake, didn't you?"

"Yep."

"See what I mean?" Dad Roundtree continued triumphantly, pounding home his argument. "Letting your superstitions interfere with your business. If you hadn't been afraid last March and had sold those cows, you would of had the money to buy feed with for your other stuff instead of having them on hand now and trying to borrow money to feed them. But your doggone blasted superstition—"

A wholly unexpected crack of thunder seemed to split the house. Both men jumped up from the table and rushed outside. A thin gray cloud, like a sheet of smoke, was high in the sky over the house—a "dry lightning" type of cloud. And as their faces were raised to it a jig-jagging sword of lightning seemed to corkscrew down toward them.

The skirts of the sky in the whole circle of the world were thick and dirty yellowish. Not a breath of air stirred.

"Well, I'll admit it do look as if it was going to bust loose," Dad Roundtree conceded.

"You don't see what I see," Waldie said. "Look northwest. It has formed there since we went in to get dinner."

He chinned at an inky patch of cloud lying on the mountains not far away. An inky black cloud with puffy white domes above it.

"Sure," Dad nodded. "Probably raining bucketfuls to the square inch up there right this minute. It'll drain this way, won't it?"

Waldie stepped forth and trotted around the house to scan his long valley pasture. It was the only pasture on his ranch that had any grazable grass. Most of his steer cattle were on it. Now they were gathered along the arroyo at the bottom where pools of sun-heated water surfaced in the low spots.

Even as the men realized the potential flood-trap that the cattle were in, they saw that the white puff-clouds were turning inky. Saw that the clouds were growing, climbing up, and spreading.

"The biggest flash-flood rain I've ever seen is going to turn loose right away," said Waldie. "And lightning. This is lightning weather."

Dad Roundtree stood there, lank and spraddle-legged, regarding his money client, measuring, watching.

"A storm," he said. "Which are you calling it? Happening Number One, or Number Two, or Number Three?"

"Two," Waldie snapped. "Number One was you coming here."

Dad kept waiting, looking at Waldie oddly.

"Oh, I'm not lying down," Waldie flashed at him. "I'm going to saddle and get down there and try to drive those steers to high ground before the flood hits and drowns them, or that'd be Number Three."

"I'll go too. Saddle a horse for me, Norm, boy."

"You stay here, Dad. That's going to be a man-pounder of a rain."

"Get saddled."

As the rising edge of the soot-black cloud cut a rule line across the zenith, Waldie hung saddles on two horses in the hot, dead stillness. Soon the two were riding. The steers were in small bunches here and there for a half mile along the arroyo down which flood water could come twenty feet deep in a mighty, rolling wall. Waldie spurred his bay to the upper end of the line of awed and silent cattle, the end toward the coming storm.

He went at them, whooping and slapping his leg with his old hat to start the animals moving out to higher ground. In the stillness, in the heat, with the feel of

electricity in the air, the steers were dumb, frightened, hard to start, sticking like flies to a door-screen. Reluctantly they began to move. Some scattered draggily to the west side of the dry-wash, some to the east side.

Dad took the east bank of the wash, Waldie the other. They could see the rain advancing down the mountain slopes. It was a solid gray wall. A cloudburst. A waterfall from the sky!

"The flood will be down on us in less than an hour," Waldie shouted.

"The cloud over us will break any second," Dad shouted back. "The water will be up to our horses' breasts in two shakes, after it starts."

BUT the overhead rain held off. They had to get the steers out of the arroyo for perhaps a quarter of a mile. Plenty yet were left to move when Waldie pulled his mount to a stop and stared up the long slope to his west-side pasture.

"What now?" Dad demanded.

"My best cows!" Waldie groaned. "Hundred head of my top stuff. They're all down against the lower wire fence. Scared, or looking for shelter, or something. Every durned head will be lightning struck if I don't get up there and let 'em through."

He struck out, spurring his bay up the slope. Dad Roundtree, a cowboy in his early days, understood the situation. He kicked his horse after Waldie.

When he caught up, Waldie was at the wire gate, hesitating in his saddle, watching and listening to the flash and snap of electricity along the wires every few seconds. Dad cocked an eye at Waldie's apparent indecision.

"Scared to get down and open the gate?" he asked.

"You're doggone right I'm scared!" Waldie admitted.

Two posts' distance away a cow stretched out her neck and bawled. Her muzzle touched a wire. A sizzle of electricity, and she went down as if hit with a sledge. Dead as she ever could be.

"Which was that, Norm?" Dad prodded. "Event number one, or two, or three?"

"All I've got to do, is to lift one little wire loop off the gate pole," Waldie said thoughtfully. "And throw the gate to one side. Yep that's all. Here goes."

He got down from his horse. He took off his big hat. Dad savvied the idea and tossed down his hat. With his hands in the felt crowns Waldie approached the posts. He knew that the dry fabric would afford a measure of insulation. He seized the pole and loop. In a wink the loop was off. He flung the flimsy gate to one side. As it touched the earth it crackled. In a blue flash a wire burned in two. It curled and snaked against Waldie's leg.

Waldie went down as the cow had gone down.

Dad Roundtree legged down from his horse in an instant. He squatted by his young friend. Waldie sat up dazedly, got to his feet, then stood, a befuddled grin on his face.

"Bet you can't do that," he said.

"What number happening?" Dad was merciless.

"Keep count your own self."

They got back to saddle and soon had the cows through the gate and away from the wire and loping down hill.

The rain coming toward them in the gray wall came with the patter and drone of a million feet. Abruptly the clouds overhead opened like an upset tub. The men suddenly could not see the cows or each other. Their horses stopped. They lowered their heads and drooped their ears as if to keep the rain out.

At the first sign of the rain abating, the men urged their mounts on down the hill. Water was running down the slope in rivulets. By the time the two reached the arroyo the flood was boot-deep across the hundred-yard expanse. The rain was a thinner veil now. Cattle were visible along the edge of the arroyo, luxuriating in the water they had been denied so long, and in the coolness.

"Too dumb to know a flood's coming," Waldie said. "Try to work them out on this side. I'll cross over."

The flowing, roaring, muddied stream was up to his horse's knees when he waded out on the east bank. Both men began to whoop at the cattle and to bump them with their horses. All at once an icy wind swept down. The cattle took on new life, began to move more quickly.

The rain slanted with the wind. The breeze fell away presently leaving only a drizzle, and visibility. Along where Waldie was working with the cattle, the water

was up to his saddle girth. A dull, unbroken roar smote his hearing.

Upstream, a ten-foot wall of water was rolling down.

His thought crossed to Dad Roundtree. He saw the old man just as Dad caught sight of the coming wall. Dad spurred and jumped his horse into the stream, evidently bent on getting across before the flood marooned him on the side away from town.

If his horse stumbles and falls, Waldie thought, Dad's done for. If that wall hits him he'll be rolled under forever.

WALDIE spurred into the now broiling, foaming flood. He'd have maybe five minutes in which to help Dad before the flood hit.

Waldie's bay was all but swept from its feet by the deepening water. The bay got its balance and went plowing toward the other side.

Both horses were being veered downstream by the powerful sweep of the water. In swift succession several happenings took place.

Dad's old gray horse stumbled and faltered, and braced his rump against the push of the stream. Just stood there, looking this way and that, afraid to move on the loosening half buried boulders which formed the stream floor. Dad threw a glance over his left shoulder to Waldie—a mute appeal for help. Waldie shouted, knowing he couldn't be heard.

He motioned for Dad to turn back to the nearer shore.

Dad tried to follow the advice. When his horse ventured to move, it fell and went completely under, out of sight. Only Dad's head and shoulders remained above

the surface. His motions showed he was trying to free himself from the stirrups.

Waldie drove his bay hard to give aid. Then the gray was up, tossing his head, blowing water from his nostrils. He went leaping and lunging toward the farther shore, the one Waldie had left.

Waldie tried to make downstream at an angle to reach the old man. Waldie's bay lost its footing on the loosening rocks. He stumbled and went under. The horse came up, frightened, and took more fright from the snorting, leaping gray. Taking the bit in his teeth, the bay went lunging toward the farther shore!

The bay was unmanageable. In spite of Waldie, he fought ahead until he was on land. By now Dad was almost to the other side, and safety. Just as Waldie turned to look, Dad's gray went down again. The ten-foot rolling wall was less than two hundred yards away. Waldie knew he couldn't sit there and watch the old man be caught and drowned. He plunged the bay back into the foaming brown stream.

Dad Roundtree and his horse had gained the east shore by the time Waldie was in mid-stream. Waldie saw Dad snatch loose the coiled rope on the saddlehorn. Dad shook out a loop. Waldie comprehended. Dad was getting ready to throw to him, if need be.

The wall was so near now that Waldie could see the debris on its slanting front—masses of old weeds, sticks, a blasted cottonwood truck, an old cow carcass. The wall was coming with a vast undulating ocean of water behind it, slanting back up to a depth of more than twenty feet, perhaps thirty.

[Turn page]

AMAZING THING! *By Cooper*

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The wall arrived. Its licking front picked up Waldie and the bay in its rocking arms, just when they were within rope distance of the shore.

Waldie felt the dirty, smouldering water roll him under—wash him from the saddle. His right hand held to the bridle reins. He fought to the surface and shook his head to clear his eyes.

Dad was running along the shore, swinging the loop in his rope. He made the cast. The loop reached its length and began to slide shut. Waldie shot up his left arm. Through the loop. The rope tightened around his forearm. He held it in the crook of his elbow, still gripping the bridle reins tight in his right fist.

Dad ran along the bank on foot, towing horse and man slowly to the shore as the rising flood kept shoving them under. Then Waldie and the bay found footing. In a moment they were on solid land.

The bay shook himself and the saddle, as a dog shakes off water. Waldie gave Dad a weak, wet grin.

"Thanks," he said.

"Did you keep track of 'em?" Dad asked.

"Track of what?"

"The happenings. How many sets of threes?"

Waldie ignored the implications and lifted a foot to his stirrup to mount. The wet and loosened saddle turned. Waldie sat down on the ground with a hard jolt.

"Number one," Dad said.

A little way along the arroyo now high in rocking, dirty flood, they saw a newly drowned calf.

"Bad happening Number two," said Dad.

CLIMBING up a steep slope toward the ranchhouse the half-exhausted bay slipped in the mud and went to his knees, pitching Waldie's stomach painfully against the saddle-horn.

"Number three!" Dad taunted.

When Waldie got down to open the corral gate, an uneasy old bull, feeling it his duty to join his cows, rumbled a threat in

his throat and bulged through the gate, knocking Waldie into the mud. He got up with a rueful grin.

"Number four?" Dad asked. "Or number one in a new series?"

"All right, all right!" Waldie flared testily. "Have your fun. I don't know what number it is. Been too many happen too fast. Call it in fours or sevens or tens or thirteens, if you want to. Come in the house. I'll make a fire and dry us out."

Dad made a sweeping gesture, taking in the entire country with one motion.

"It'll be two weeks before this rain makes good strong grass for the cattle," he said. "I'm going to let you have money to carry you through till the grass gets good."

"What!" Waldie ejaculated. "After all the busts I've made today? Carry me this whole year?"

"Something tells me you're cured of your nonsensical superstitions. You see things can happen in any number or quantity. In whole droves. Huh?"

"Reckon so," Waldie conceded, with a grin in which agreement and contrariness were mixed.

DAD slapped him heartily on his wet back.

"It's all right, son. We've all got our little pet superstitions—even me! Only they oughtn't to interfere with business and get a man down. Now rustle me up a pen and ink and a blank check and I'll find a note form for you to sign."

When they were in dry clothing, Dad sat down at the kitchen table to do his writing. He bore too hard with the rusty pen in making out the check and broke it. Vexed, he tossed the pen-holder down and knocked over the ink bottle. While trying to mop up the mess, he mistakenly used the note that Waldie had signed for a blotter.

"Haw-haw-haw!" Waldie roared, his good nature restored. "Threes!"

"Huh, three can't hurt me," Dad declared, and rapped on wood.

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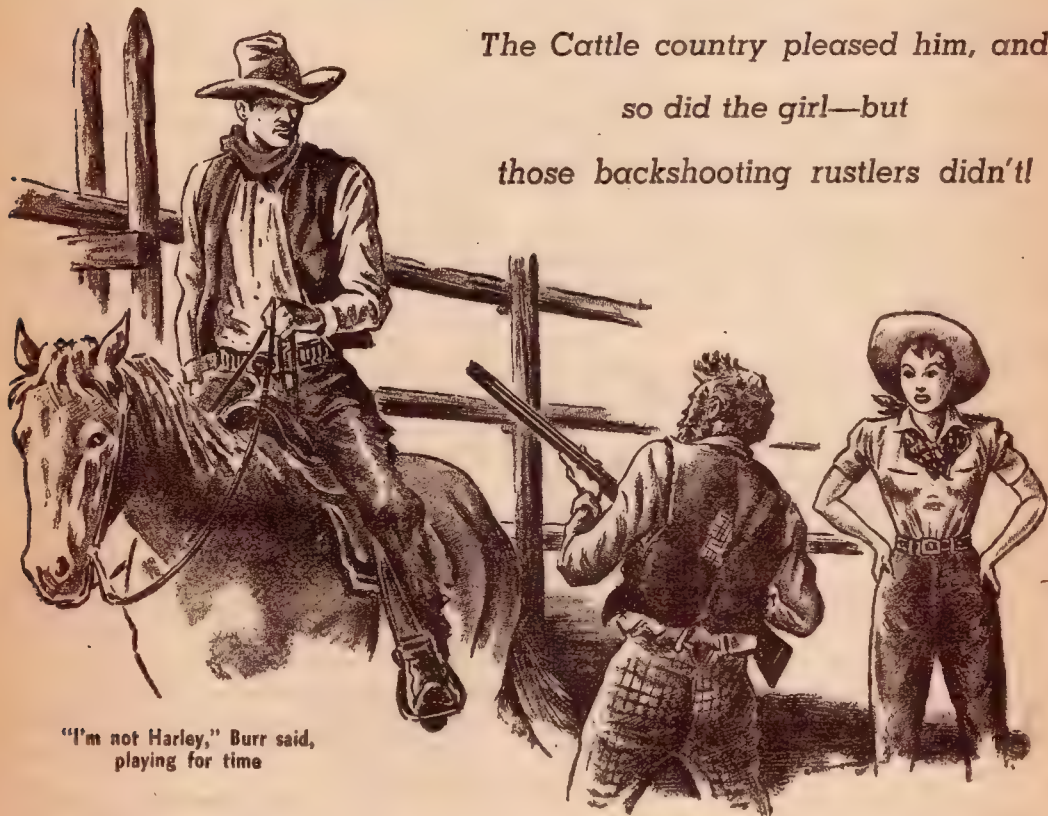
I

WHEN Jim Barr saw Aspen Creek Valley he knew he was through riding the trails—through with putting his foot into other peoples' troubles. He was lucky to be alive, he thought, and not to be carrying a skinful of lead. But he was even luckier that fate had directed him here.

He wasn't exactly a saddle pilgrim, Barr told himself wryly, but he was only a whoop and a holler from being one when he compared himself with men who had homes and spreads of their own—men who had put down roots in a community.

Shortly after sun-up Barr had his first

*The Cattle country pleased him, and
so did the girl—but
those backshooting rustlers didn't!*



"I'm not Harley," Burr said,
playing for time

TROUBLE

is where you find it

Jim Barr Wanted to Settle Down—but First

view of the valley. He reined in his horse on the crest of a ridge and slacked off to let his eyes rove hungrily over the scene below him. A dozen creek branches meandered through it, looking like silver threads on a green carpet. There were rows of lance-leaved cottonwoods and alders along the streams and mottes of silver-trunked aspens, with brownish cattle interspersed among them like flakes of cinnamon.

He nodded. This was it. Laid out fresh and clean as if waiting for him to come find it. If he didn't remain in this valley he'd never settle—and he meant to settle, come hell or high water. Here he could start a small outfit of his own and ride and work without the thought of eyes peering along a rifle barrel aimed midway between his shoulder blades.

Barr's glance came to the buildings of a spread at the foot of the ridge that looked like a promising place to throw his rope until he became acquainted with the people of the valley. He kned his horse down the ridge, humming a sing-song tune.

As Barr came closer to the spread his enthusiasm cooled. It was well laid out, but had the appearance of a good ranch going to seed. There was something about it, too, something he couldn't seem to put his finger on, that wasn't right. Then, he knew suddenly that it was something he felt and not a thing he could see.

He rode past the log ranch house and on toward the pole corral where a boy was trying to rope a frisky calf. A door of the house banged shut. An arresting shout reached Barr's ears. He pulled up. A bareheaded man, a stubble of rusty beard darkening his face, was running toward him, a shotgun in his hands.

"Damn you, Harley!" the old man shouted, as he slowed to a walk and jerked up the muzzle of the gun. "I'll blast your carcass all over the range."

Barr sat perfectly still, his hands quiet. A gust of cold air blew against his neck as the man snapped the butt of the gun against his shoulder. The tight, wild, and unstable timbre in the man's voice, more than his actions, held Barr motionless.

"I'm not Harley," Barr said, playing for time.

"The hell you ain't Red Harley! I'll scatter you—"

"Uncle Max!" a voice thinned with excitement came from the corral. "Put down your gun. He's not Harley."

"You sure?" Max lowered the gun, but jerked it up again. "What's he doin' here? Maybe he's one of Harley's gun-slicks."

"He doesn't look like a man who'd ride for Red Harley," the boy said, coming up behind Barr, who had turned his horse. "Go back into the house and finish your sleep."

BLINKING his red-rimmed eyes Max turned back sullenly to the house, muttering to himself.

"Phew!" The boy pulled off his battered hat to wipe sweat from his forehead with a blue bandanna. .

Barr caught his breath. This boy was a girl, and a pretty one. Her blonde hair was pinned in a big bun on the top of her head. At closer range the faded butter-nut jeans and much-washed hickory shirt could not hide the fact that she was a girl. Her eyes were brown and as bright as an aspen leaf in autumn, Barr thought.

"You'll excuse Uncle Max, please," the girl said. "He's nearly dead for sleep from riding the range."

Barr's deep-tanned face creased in a smile. "There's no hard feelings," he said, and got down from his horse for a drink at the inlet to the water trough.

The girl studied him an instant—six feet of bone and hard muscle. She asked, "Would you be looking for a job, mister?"

"Not right away," Barr said, and climbed back into his saddle. "I aim to poke around Laramie for a spell first." To take her mind off his refusal, he asked, "Who's the gent your uncle was dead set to plaster over the range?" He wished he hadn't asked the question before he finished it.

"Red Harley. He owns the next spread to the south," the girl said, her full lips curved scornfully. "He's a rustler and an ambusher. He backshot my brother, Skip,

He Had to Clear Away Some Gunsmoke Debris

nearly a month ago. Skip isn't able to do any riding yet."

"That's too bad," Barr said. "I hope he's able to get back into the saddle soon." He saw keen disappointment cloud her brown eyes, but he closed his mind to it, and kneed his horse toward the trail. The Box C—that was the brand on the horses in the corral—didn't look like a good place from which to size up the valley. His mind and time would be loaded with side troubles.

"Get on, horse," Barr told his roan, when he was out of earshot. "That girl would have had us roped and trussed up



JIM BARR

like a calf for branding if we'd dallied another minute." He jogged on, humming an off-key tune, the fragrance of sage and bee balm sweet in his nostrils, the trill of a lark on a mesquite music to his ears.

Off to the east he saw two riders cross the brow of a swell and come toward him at a high lope. He measured the horsemen from the corner of his eye. The man in front was a big fellow, thick chested, with a heavy hand on the bridle reins. His partner was tall and reedy, with crossed ammunition belts and a hawkish face.

Barr's careless glance slid over the men as he rode on toward the spot where they had halted. They carried new Winchester rifles in their saddle scabbards, and the reedy man's guns were encased in well-oiled leather. The man set a great store by his weapons, Barr sensed. A *leather slapper*, he thought, tensing a little. With a neutral "Howdy," he rode past them.

"Hold a minute, cowboy!" the heavy shouldered one commanded. "Where you going?"

Barr brought his horse around slowly and let the glance of his gray eyes run over the man's face. He had a large nose and a pair of raking eyes. His hair was brick red where it curled from under his hat.

"Down the trail," Barr said noncommittally.

"We saw you ride into the Box C."

BARR fished tobacco and papers from a vest pocket and let the redhead hang while he rolled a smoke.

"Any law against it?" he asked.

"There ain't any law against that," the red head growled, "But there's a law against rustling, just what Skip Lawson's been doing. What's your name, cowboy?"

"Jim Barr. What's yours?"

"Red Harley. Don't throw your rope with the Box C."

"Do you have any proof that this Lawson has been stealing your cattle?" Barr asked.

"I ain't caught him redhanded—yet," Harley growled. "If I had, I've have hung him to a cottonwood limb. But I saw him sneaking around in the trees on the creek last night. I reckon he's getting ready to start in again. Don't hire on with him."

The redhead's story didn't agree with what the girl had told him about her brother's condition. But such stories never jibed, he knew by experience. Harley might be just a quick-tempered redhead who thought he had a legitimate grievance against Lawson, but his side-kick was nothing more than a cold-eyed killer.

A tight smile curved Barr's lips, and he said, "Your talk doesn't persuade me, Harley."

"You're invitin' lead poisoning if you throw your rope with the Box C," Harley warned, his eyes smoking up. "I'm cleaning the place out from hell to breakfast if I lose another cow."

The reedy man's arm twitched and his fingers fanned open above the butt of his right hand gun. "Let me blast this smart gent out of his saddle, Harley."

Barr's right hand hung near his holstered gun, but it was his left hand that pulled the pistol from behind the waistband of his pants in a flash of movement.

"Hold it, Kinro," Harley growled.

"Good advice," Barr said coolly, "to give a slow-handed man. I don't know how much weight you throw around the valley, Harley, but I want you to understand one thing about me. I've been riding the trails too long and too far to be told which ones I can use. I like this country. I'm staying. If I pick the Box C, that's my business."

"I warned you what will happen," Harley said.

"And I heard you," Barr countered. "Ride on. I don't want to show my back to your gun-hawk."

Harley sawed his horse around and Kinro followed. Kinro said, "For a dime I'd fill you so full of lead—"

"You'd do it for nothing—if I had my back turned."

Barr's horse was headed back toward the Box C. An ingrained stubbornness started him off in that direction. He admitted to himself that the girl and her plight had influenced his decision.

II

THE girl came out of the log ranch house as Barr loped up. It was plain she was relieved to see him again.

"I'll take that job, ma'am, if you're still offering it."

"We'll be mighty obliged to you," she told him and put out a hand impulsively. "My name's June Carson. I'd like for you to come in and meet my brother, Skip."

Carson? Red Harley had said Skip Lawson, Barr recalled. A half-brother, he thought. Barr told her his name, then said, "I met Harley and his gun-hawk down the trail, and Harley said some things I didn't cotton to."

"Did you tell him you were coming

back here to work?"

"I suspect he got the drift of it," Barr said.

The girl looked at him appraisingly. "Didn't he threaten you?" Her eyebrows arched. "I see. You got the drop on him—on them. My, you must be fast with a gun."

"Tolerable," Barr said. "Now tell me what the trouble is here in this end of the valley."

"There's nothing involved about it," June said. "We've lost half our herd since Red Harley bought the old Star Cross a year ago. About a month ago Harley backshot Skip one night while Skip was riding the range along Aspen Creek, the boundary between us and Star Cross."

"Did Skip actually see Harley or any of his men at that time?" Barr asked.

June shook her head. "No-o," she admitted. "But who else could have done it?"

"I don't know," Barr said. "We'll have to find out. I believe you said that Skip wasn't able to ride yet."

"Oh, no. He hasn't been on a horse for nearly a month."

Barr followed the girl into the house, thinking hard. The situation was more complex than the girl realized, and loaded with dynamite. It seemed that Harley had a case or was making one. Which-ever was true, wasn't too important when it stemmed from a trigger-edged man like Harley. He'd act, then think. Barr knew he'd have to move fast to prevent a gun war. There would be other people involved, he knew, that he hadn't yet learned about. There always were in such cases.

Skip Lawson was tall and thin, and about nineteen, with a heavy thatch of dark hair. He was lounging over the dining table experimenting with a five-hand layout of stud poker when Barr and June entered.

After June had introduced the two men, she said, "Mr. Barr changed his mind. He's going to help us."

Skip grimaced. "You in the habit of working for nothing, Barr? June goes off half-cocked now and then. I don't know how she figures to pay you."

"We can sell a couple of beefs to the butcher shops in Laramie," June said, color flooding her tanned cheeks.

Barr knew he wouldn't have liked Lawson greatly under any circumstances, and he liked him less under this one.

"If Harley leaves us any to sell," Skip eyed Barr. "You're new in the valley. Where did you ride in from?" Barr didn't like the question on short acquaintance; it showed bad manners. The feeling grew on him that June Carson was unknowingly in a game where the odds were not only heavily against her, but that a stacked deck was being used.

He said, "I came out of Kansas and Nebraska. I had a small spread of my own until the wind and sand and drought licked me. I drifted out this way looking for a country with mountains and trees and free-flowing streams. This seems to be it."

"It's a God-forsaken hole," Skip jeered. "You'll feel better about it," Barr said, "when you're back in the saddle again."

"One bullet between the shoulder blades is plenty for me," Skip said, his lips twisted cynically. "Watch that Harley doesn't give you one. Being fast with your guns won't help you if an ambusher draws a bead on you from the brush."

"I know some about that," Barr said laconically. He liked the cynical Skip less and less. It was plain that Skip had eavesdropped on his conversation with June.

JUNE walked with Barr toward the corral, and Barr asked, "Who lives close around? Whose range touches Box C?"

The girl pointed to the southeast, toward the heavily timbered ridges of the Laramie Mountains, a blue-purple curtain in the morning sunlight. "The Travins, three cousins, have a small spread off there. South of them, and adjoining Red Harley's range, is the Strone outfit. Then straight south and on the other side of Aspen Creek is Harley's spread. Being in the elbow of the ridge, there is no one north or west of us."

June's glance followed Barr's to pick up two horsemen riding in from the range. She said, "They are Link and Rufe Travin, who have the spread next to the mountains."

While they watched the riders come on, Barr asked, "Have you ever had any cause to suspect the Travins or the

Strones? Where would rustled cattle be sold?"

"We've had no reason to suspect anyone but Harley," June said. "All the others say they have lost a lot of cattle—even Red Harley. It's my guess the rustlers would drive the cattle through the pass in the mountains to Cheyenne instead of trying to sell them in Laramie."

Barr mechanically felt the set of his guns. June saw the movement of his hands and said, "You don't have anything to fear from the Travins. Red Harley is the one to watch. I don't know much about the Strones, except that they are hard-looking men."

"It's better to be ready than sorry," Barr said. "You never can tell. Four little deuces beat three big aces any time. By the way, what has the sheriff done about Skip being shot?"

"Nothing," June said scornfully. "Dixon—he's the sheriff—said Skip had no evidence against Harley."

That was true, Barr thought, if they had given the sheriff no more information than they had him. However, it might be well to look the sheriff over, if he had time. He watched the Travins ride in. They were astride good horses and each man carried a brass-bellied Sharps on his saddle.

"Link and Rufe Travin," June said, nodding at the men as she called them by name. "This is Jim Barr, a new man, who is giving us a hand while Skip is laid up."

"Howdy," Barr said, and measured the men with one keen glance. They were of a pattern, tall, rawboned, tow-headed, each with a quid of tobacco in a cheek, and a sleepy, lazy air about them.

They nodded at Barr, but looked at June. Rufe Travin said, "I don't want to do you no bad turn, Miss June, seeing how you ought to have a hand, but taking on a stranger right now ain't going to help quiet the valley none. It's ready to boil over any time, with the backshooting of Whitey Barnes of the Diamond B, and the two riders of Dan Lock's, and Skip's shooting. Besides, I just heard this man had words with Red Harley. You know how hair-triggered he is."

"Harley has hired two new men, and gunmen at that," June pointed out.

"You ain't got the force to buck Red

Harley," Rufe blurted. His glance cut to Farr. "Mister, you'll be doing Miss June and all of us a big favor, yourself, too, I reckon, to get over the ridge before dark." His glance cut back to June. "The Strones ain't going to like you bringing in a stranger right now, neither."

Barr saw June raise her chin defiantly. He remained quiet. He could learn more that way. June said, "The Box C is my home, the only home I have ever known. I love every log and stick and stone of it. We've lost half our herd to the rustlers. I'm going to fight to hold the other half."

"You could lose it all in jig time," Rufe blurted, "by this man flinging his tail in Harley's face. Get Red Harley's dander raised any more at the Box C, he'll shoot it up and touch a match to it without batting an eyelash."

JIM BARR looked at Rufe levelly and said, "I like this valley. I'm going to be staying a long time." He turned to June. "It's up to you whether I stay on the Box C."

"Then you'll stay," she said, eyeing Rufe defiantly.

Travin shrugged his bony shoulders. "Between the two of you, you'll get a gun war started that'll kill us all." He looked at his cousin. "Let's get out of this."

"We'll get no help from them," Barr said wryly.

Under the warm afternoon sun, several days later, Barr and Max rode out on the range toward Aspen Creek. June's warning to be watchful hung with them, but the more Barr saw of the valley with its gently rolling swells of grassland, its rushing streams and trees, the more he knew he would stay here when he had finished what he had to do.

Max pointed out the headquarters of the nearby spreads. "There are three of them Travins," he said, "But I've seen the third one only once. He had his face all tied up. Said stove grease had jumped up and burnt him. He works somewhere over the mountain and only comes to see his cousins once in a while. What'd you think of Rufe and Link?"

"They looked harmless," Barr said, refusing to offer any opinion. He had run into so many cross currents it was not possible to arrive at any definite conclu-

sion about anyone he had met in the valley, save June Carson. He looked slantwise at the old man. Max's running out at him with the shotgun might have been nothing more than a good show, to discourage a stranger from lighting at the Box C.

They topped a rise and saw three men riding in their direction. The way the three horsemen sat their saddles, the steady deliberate lope of their horses, and the set of the men's heads bespoke an indomitable will.

"Them are the Strones," Max said. "Jed, Lafe, and Joe."

The riders came directly toward them, and Barr kept his horse headed straight on. He was on Box C range, and if anyone turned aside it wouldn't be he. Two, three rods in front of him the Strones pulled up their horses. Barr saw at a glance that the Strones, more of a pattern even than the Travins, were lean, hard-eyed men, with iron in their blood and brass-bellied Sharps across the bows of their saddles.

The eldest of the trio, Jed Strone, let his eyes bore through Barr. He said, "I reckon you're the new man at the Box C?"

"That's right," he said. He thought, News always gets around fast when people are on the prod. He wondered who had brought it to the Strones, Harley or the Travins?

"I'm Jed Strone," the spokesman for the trio said. "These are my brothers, Lafe and Joe. You're making a big mistake to get tangled up with the Box C."

"Strone," Barr said calmly, "you're the second man today who has tried to tell me what trails to ride. The other one didn't make the grade—and I don't think you will. Lay your cards on the table, and I'll have a look."

"You talk big, mister," Strone said, his eyes hard and unwavering. He touched the Sharps on his saddle bow with a gnarled finger. "It might be you'd not ride away from here."

Barr nodded, as he shifted almost imperceptibly in his saddle, so that his arms would not be hindered of free movement. He said, "If I stay, Strone, at least two of you will keep me company."

"Hell, Jed, tell him what's on our minds," Lafe Strone growled, "Then may-

be he won't be so cocky."

"You're tying up with a rustling outfit," Jed said, his voice hard and hostile.

"What—what are you saying, Jed Strone?" Max blurted.

BARR shook his head at Max without taking his eyes off the Strones.

"You've been listening to Red Harley."

"We don't have to listen to nobody," Jed said flatly. "We got minds and eyes of our own. Lawson's been selling a heap of cattle in Cheyenne. A lot more than he's got any license to sell. A man's covering up something when he drives cattle to Cheyenne that he could sell in Laramie for the same amount of money."

"I won't argue with you there," Barr said reasonably. "But what points a finger at Skip Lawson?"

"Hell, mister, he used his own name," Lafe Strone threw in.

"A man's name isn't tied to him," Barr countered. "Another man could use it to cover his own tracks."

"Somebody could, but somebody didn't," Jeb said harshly. "I just got back from Cheyenne, and the description two cattle buyers gave me fits Skip Lawson like a pair of boots. And there ain't been no sales since Lawson was shot."

"Joe and me saw Lawson riding the creek last night," Lafe said, "keeping himself screened by the alders. He ought to be strung up to a cottonwood, and we're pretty likely to do it."

Barr shook his head stiffly, his mouth tight. "You've got enough evidence for a cottonwood hanging, but not for a court. I've seen men hung and heard of others who turned out to be innocent. There'll be no hanging here until I've dug deeper into the matter."

"While our herd gets dug into deeper," Jed rasped. "If you're going to run with a rustler, mister, you're going to wear the same brand—and take the same consequences. We won't be warning you again."

III

JED STRONE cut his horse around in a tight circle, his brothers following him. Barr mopped the sweat from his face as he watched them gallop off. It was the old pattern of the beginning of a range

war, someone trying to build up his herd and power by throwing a long loop, by threats, and intimidation. Each man accused his neighbor.

What might happen to Skip Lawson personally didn't arouse any great concern in him, Barr reflected. But what happened to June Carson and her home, with all it meant to her did concern him greatly, and he didn't try to pretend that it did not. Further, he meant to stay in this valley when he had finished this job, and a range war would stir up a bitterness that wouldn't be lived down in a generation. A cold sweat bathed his body. He had to move fast if a calamity was to be averted. The hair-triggered Harley and the implacable Strones might explode into rash action any minute.

Barr's gaze went ahead of him thoughtfully as he and Max rode farther into the foothills. He asked Max, "Was Skip away from the Box C long enough at times to take a drove of cattle to Cheyenne?"

As they rode into a narrow canyon, the old man frowned and let his gaze run over the timbered slopes. Presently, he corraled his thoughts into words and said, "For six months or so Skip's been going on a toot every three or four weeks. Every time he was away a couple of days or more."

Long enough to make a drive to Cheyenne, Barr thought. He couldn't handle it alone. Who was he working with? Barr leaned forward in his saddle to ease the weight on his buttocks. His hat jerked from his head, and the flat slap of a rifle spanged down from the ridge on his left.

Another slug whined above his head as Barr pitched out of his saddle to the shelter of a boulder, Max behind him. Barr had drawn his holstered gun as he went off his horse. The rifle cracked again and rock splinters flew from the boulder above Barr's head. He shrugged and holstered his gun. The ambusher was too expert with the rifle to be challenged with a revolver. Barr pointed to his hat, lying in the grass.

"That slug would have gone into one ear and out the other, if I hadn't leaned forward when I did."

"Them damn Strones, I bet," Max growled.

"Could have been," Barr admitted, "But

not likely." As he kept one ear cocked for sounds from the ridge, Barr went on, "I suppose Skip is Miss June's half-brother."

"Step-brother," Max said. "June's ma died when she was fourteen and her pa married Skip's mother, a widow. Then, her pa and Skip's ma was killed by a runaway team last year."

"Skip doesn't seem to like the valley much," Barr said.

"Skip and his ma come from St. Louis to Laramie only a short spell before she married John Carson. Skip's used to a big city. He didn't like it none when Red Harley made a good offer for the Box C, and June wouldn't sell. Her pa left the spread to June and Skip, but put in the will that none of it could be sold without June's say-so."

Barr nodded, understanding a great deal that had not been clear before. Skip could be trying to get his part out of the spread without a sale. He listened intently for a while. "Our friend is moving off, up the ridge. He likely has a horse over the crest. Wait here. I'll look."

Barr worked carefully through the brush. This hadn't been a chance ambush, he knew. Someone wanted him off the range—out of the valley. Neither of the two shots while he and Max were in the open had gone close to the old man. Upslope he found the spot where the ambusher had bellied down behind a wind-fall. He found two shiny shell cases among the leaves and pine needles. He scowled as he examined the butts of the cases—centerfire .44 Winchesters. Harley and Kinro had carried such guns on their saddles. Had Skip been working with Harley? Had they fallen out over something, maybe the split? Or were they working with the Travins, maybe even the Strones? They carried Sharps, but that didn't necessarily mean that one of them didn't possess a Winchester in addition.

Barr dropped the empty cases in his pocket and went down the ridge, sure only of one thing; someone wanted him off the range, and that someone would gladly put a bullet in his back to accomplish it.

"Not enough evidence up there to hang anyone," he told Max. "Let's get back to the ranch house and figure on what we're going to do."

AT THE corral Barr unsaddled his horse. He nodded at a bay gelding that stood with his head over the fence. "That's Skip's horse, isn't it?" he asked Max.

"Sure. Why so?" Max wanted to know.

"I just wondered," Barr said, knowing the old man was too near-sighted to see the faint outline made by a saddle blanket on the horse's back. He remembered, to, that Max had never offered an opinion about Skip. Maybe the old man thought it was a family matter? When Max had gone into the house, Barr inspected the bay at closer range.

Supper was a silent, constrained affair at the Box C. After the meal Barr went out to the porch steps and rolled a smoke. Off to the north thunderheads were gathering over the mountains and the distant rumble of thunder came down on the freshening breeze.

June came out and sat down near Barr. She had taken off the hickory shirt and jeans and put on a blue-checked gingham dress. Her face and figure made the simple dress attractive. Here, Barr thought, was a girl made to be wanted and loved and cared for, and fate wasn't giving her any of those things. But this was no time for such thinking, he told himself, and tried to focus on the main thing—how to stop the stampede that seemed about to trample her underfoot.

"What sort of guns and how many do you have in the house, Miss June?" he asked casually.

She looked at him closely, as if trying to read what went on in his mind. "Max has a Sharps, a revolver, and a shotgun. I have a Spencer rifle and a Colt, and Skip has two handguns and one of those new seventy-three Winchesters he bought recently in Laramie."

Another Winchester centerfire in the picture, Barr thought. Then he said, "I see Skip's horse was used this afternoon. I didn't know he felt like riding yet."

Skip stepped out of the house. "Sure, I was riding. Is that any business of yours?"

"Maybe," Barr said. "I like the cards on the table when I play. What did you want to cover up when you rubbed dry sand on your horse's back to dry out the sweat?" Barr picked up his hat and pointed to the two holes. "An ambusher did

that with a centerfire Winchester this afternoon."

"You can tell the make of the gun from the holes?"

Barr fished the empty shell cases from his pocket. "I can tell plain enough from these."

Skip glanced at them cynically. "All right, Mr. Pinkerton, tell me what they spell. Harley and Kinro have new Winchesters, I have one, and likely many others. What makes you think I'd want to backshoot you?"

"When I know the answer, I'll tell you."

"Why, damn you! I ought to run you off the Box C right now." Fury climbed red in Skip's throat. "Get off before I come back." He whirled on his heel and tramped off to the corral.

Barr and June watched him saddle his horse. The Winchester was in the saddle boot. He swung up and loped out toward Aspen Creek. "Maybe you'd rather not stay?" June said tentatively.

Barr looked at the girl searchingly. "Have you changed your mind about wanting me to stay?"

"No," she said quickly. "I don't understand Skip. He acts so peculiar at times. Do you really think he—he—"

Barr spread his hands. "A man is likely to land in quicksands jumping at conclusions," he said carefully. A half-dozen years of riding close-watched by enemies had taught him to be as close with his tongue. He stood up. "I'm going back to the range. If you should need me here, fire three quick-spaced shots." eyes.

"You are going to follow Skip?"

Barr shook his head. "I'm going to watch for rustlers. I had planned it this afternoon. I put a bunch of Box C cows in that big swale that opens on the creek."

JUNE laid a hand impulsively on his arm. "In spite of what happened this afternoon and—and Skip riding out there now, you're still going to take the risk—in the dark?"

There were risks, Barr well knew. But they were kinds of danger he knew how to combat. Here was a more potent danger, being close to this girl, and he had no weapons with which to meet it. He'd have

to go now, get this job over with and move on before he lost his head, along with his heart. Besides, he thought, Skip or whoever was doing the rustling would likely use the approaching storm to help hide their work.

"You can't catch rustlers sitting on a ranchhouse porch," he said with forced lightness. "Will you get that old Keener of Max's for me. There's nothing like a shotgun to make a bunch of hard-bitten men stand still."

A few yards deep in the alders and high brush growth of the swale, Barr stood with his back to a sapling and waited, listening. Only the distant roll of thunder and the mooring of cattle down the swale disturbed the quiet which lay thickly over the land. Moonlight drifted through the laced branches, casting weird patterns of shadows that hid Barr and his horse as effectively as a moonless dark.

The storm rode closer from the north and gusts of rain-laden wind beat among the bushes. The alder branches creaked in their wake. Barr sank his chin deep into the collar of his slicker and ran his hand soothingly over his horse's nose. The roan had grown restive.

Barr felt a tension building up in him, a tension that communicated itself to his horse. He felt sweat running down the inside of his arm, greasing his hand against the leather of his gun holster. He cocked his ears, listening intently for sounds from down the swale. Faintly now he heard the voices of men urging the cattle along with sharp commands, and an occasional protesting bellow.

Then, like a flash, Barr whirled at the sound of a snapping twig, his hand darting for his gun. Fuzzily, but clear enough in the moonlit darkness to be plainly recognized, he saw the leering face of Skip Lawson.

Barr didn't attempt to pull the gun from beneath his slicker. As it bucked in his fist, a bolt of lightning seemed to lift off the top of his skull, and all thought and sight and feeling ribboned off and a black mist rolled in to cover him.

IV

BARR came back to consciousness slowly. He felt the rain beating lightly

against his face and opened his eyes. The hammering in his head made him dizzy. He felt gingerly of the knot on his temple. Then he sat up and saw the body of Skip Lawson, close enough for him to touch it. Lawson was lying on his side, his face toward Barr and shaded by his hat brim. There was a blood-ringed hole in the front of his jacket, near the heart.

Scratching among the leaves and twigs near him, Barr looked for the gun Lawson had dropped, but it was gone. He saw that Lawson's holster was empty, too. He felt behind the waistband of his pants for his pistol. It was there. Barr struggled to his knees, rested a moment, then lurched to his feet. He heard his horse whinny.

Barr studied the sky an instant. He had been lying in the bushes for about two hours, he guessed. He tramped out of the thicket. The rain, wind-borne from the north, came only in gusty squalls. The moon was bright enough, except when covered by a scudding cloud, to see the deep-printed tracks of cattle that had been hazed along at a run toward the mountains.

He hurried back into the thicket. He saw Skip's horse near his own. The shotgun was still on his own saddle, and the Winchester on Skip's. Suddenly, Barr frowned. This horse wasn't Skip's bay—it was a dun. He looked at its hip, but there wasn't light enough in the shadows to read the brand. Likely, Skip had changed to a horse brought by his partners, one with an out-of-the-valley brand

—an old ruse to cover tracks if a horse were killed or crippled during the foray on a herd.

Barr went back to hunker down for a close look at the dead man. He got up, nodding, a wry smile on his lips as he went for the horses. He had to tie the snorting dun to a tree to get the body of the dead man over his saddle. He took saddle rope and lashed the body fast.

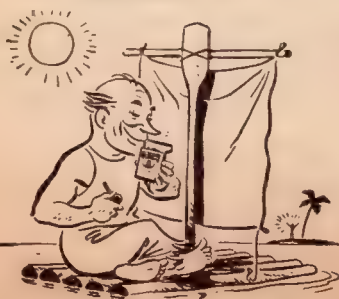
Barr knew he was guessing as he rode along, with squalls of intermittent rain slapping him in the face. But there was no time to check; he had to move fast and base his guess on experience. The rustlers knew one of their number had been shot. They would attempt to set up an alibi for themselves after driving the cattle into one of the hundred-odd nearby canyons. The knowledge that the valley harbored such sinister, backshooting characters posing as honest men, fired a deep-seated fury in him.

An oblong rectangle of light shone through the lone window in the front of the cabin as Barr rode up warily, leading the dun. He dropped the reins and shifted the shotgun to his left hand, leaving the right one free.

"Hello, the house!" he shouted, and saw the light blink out. Watching, he presently made out the angular shape of Jed Strone on the cabin's shadowed side, his body pressed close to the wall. "This is Barr, Strone. I have no quarrel with you and your brothers. Tell Rufe and Link Travin to come out, their hands up. I want them for rustling."

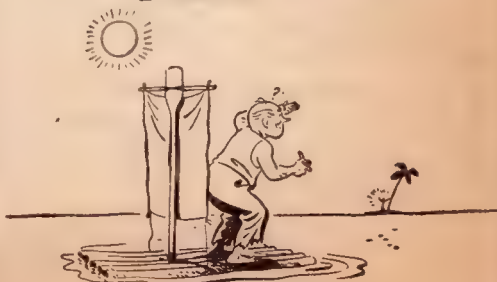
THE ADVENTURES OF

IT SMELLS GRAND



AROMA SWEET AS ANY ROSE—

IT PACKS RIGHT



PACKS TO PLEASE YOU—
GOODNESS KNOWS!

"Why do you come here looking for them?" Strone asked.

"Because I know they are here," Barr insisted, feeling he had guessed right. "Are you sending them out, or do I have to go in?"

The Travins came out, on the opposite side of the cabin from Strone—shooting as they came.

A slug ripped through Barr's slicker between his elbow and his ribs as he dived from his horse. The slash burned like a branding iron, but the pain of it was forgotten in the welter of excitement.

THE Travins let out a shout of exultation and came on firing as Barr left his saddle. They fired hurriedly, wildly. Steeling his nerves against the thud of the slugs against the hard-packed earth around him and their weird whine as they ricocheted past his ears, Barr aimed deliberately and squeezed the trigger of his pistol with care.

As the second burst of fire lanced out from Barr's gun, Rufe Travin stopped in his tracks, spun around on his heels and dropped like an undercut pine. Link started to turn, to run back to the shelter of the cabin. He didn't make it. Another hard slamming knock from Barr's pistol drove him flat to the ground in a sprawled and lifeless heap.

The furious blare of sound died out and Barr rolled swiftly to the shadow of the wagon shed on his left. The horses had bolted back along the trail. The Strones held to the shadow of the cabin,

three sinister figures, with rifles leveled menacingly at Barr.

"Hear my story before you start something you'll regret," Barr called to them. "You're covered with a shotgun."

"Start talking," Jed Strone rasped.

The sound of pounding hoofs rode down on the wind from the north. Before Barr could start his story, Red Harley and a rider galloped up, and behind them came Kinro and another rider, leading Barr's horse—which had bolted when the firing started—and the dun.

"What's going on, Strone?" Harley shouted, as he let his glance cut over the Travins on the ground. Then his eyes picked up Barr in the shadow of the wagon shed. "I ought to have guessed you was in it."

Kinro had swung down from his horse to look at the body lashed to the dun's saddle. Jed and Joe Strone walked up hard-eyed and stiff-legged to look, too. Rufe Strone stayed in the shadow of the cabin, his rifle covering Barr.

"It's Skip Lawson," Jed called out and whirled on Barr. "What kind of a deal is this? You were working for him."

Barr stood with his back to the shed, the shotgun in his hands moving in a narrow arc over the group. "I'm working for the Box C. Keep your shirt on."

"This begins to smell plenty," Kinro jeered.

"Talk, mister," Jed Strone growled. The hard-bitten man didn't flinch at the sight of the shotgun aimed at his belt.

[Turn page]

UNCLE WALTER

IT SMOKES SWEET



WITH EVERY PUFF
YOUR PLEASURE GROWS!

-with Sir Walter Raleigh!

IT CAN'T BITE!

SIR WALTER RALEIGH'S BLEND OF CHOICE KENTUCKY BURLEYS IS EXTRA-AGED TO GUARD AGAINST TONGUE BITE, AND SIR WALTER RALEIGH NEVER LEAVES A SOGGY HEEL IN YOUR PIPE. STAYS LIT TO THE LAST PUFF.



*It costs
no more
to get
the best!*

"You killed the man you were working for and shot down a couple of innocent men in our door yard to get the bounty the county's offering for rustlers." He jutted the rifle forward. "Now talk—fast."

"First," Barr said, as he fished a badge from his vest pocket, "I'm a range detective for the Association. Second, that's not Skip Lawson across the dun's back."

"The hell it ain't!" Kinro bawled, as Harley and the Strones shifted their weight irresolutely from one foot to the other, blinking at what they had heard.

Barr nodded at Jed Strone. "Look at him close—where the rain has washed the shoe blackening out of his tow-colored hair. It's the same color of hair as the other Travins. Look through the rip in his shirt. There's no old bullet hole in his body."

Harley looked, and so did Jed Strone. The others crowded up, too, to have a closer look at the dead man. Strone, still suspicious, said, "What's your story?"

Barr told them about planting the bunch of cattle in the swale and getting hit over the head. "When I woke up," he went on, "I saw the cattle had been driven away by the rustlers and guessed that the dead man was the third Travin. I suspected the other two would come here to set up an alibi for their whereabouts for when their cousin was killed."

"I reckon it's pretty clear who was selling the cattle in Cheyenne under Lawson's name," Strone said grudgingly.

AT THAT moment June Carson and Max rode in. June leaped from her horse and ran up to Barr. "You're not hurt, are you, Jim?" she asked.

"Nothing that I won't get over quickly," he said. "Where's Skip?"

"He's coming," June said. "I'm glad he wasn't mixed up in this. He came back shortly after you left, and said he didn't want to be blamed if you were backshot." She glanced at the Travins on the ground, and the body on the dun.

"You caught them rustling our cattle?"

As Barr nodded, Skip Lawson loped up. Jed Strone told him to get off his horse and have a look at his double. He also told him about Travin using his name in

Cheyenne. Skip shook his head.

He said, "I guess it's plain why Link and Rufe kept this cousin out of sight in the valley. Those sleepy looking galoots sure had me fooled."

"The rest of us, too," Harley fretted. "I reckon you pretty well know now who backshot you?" His glance cut to Barr. "Mister, you'll get a nice reward for catching those polecats. If you want to quit being a range detective and settle in the valley, I got a foreman's job for you. Kinro is moving on tomorrow."

"I'll think about your offer," Barr said, "because I'm staying in the valley."

As Barr rode back toward the ranch-house with the other Box C people, June said, "I should have known you weren't just a footloose cowboy. I guess you'll be riding on in spite of what you said to Harley?"

"I'm through with riding—and looking for trouble," Barr said. "I knew this was my last range detective job when I saw Aspen Creek Valley. I'm staying right here for the rest of my life."

"Then maybe you'll take the job at Red Harley's?"

Skip spoke out before Barr could answer. "Maybe I've got a proposition you'd consider. I'm not cut out for a rancher. I guess you saw that? I like the big cities. You'll be getting the reward for capturing the Travins. I'll sell you my half of the Box C at a reasonable price. Think it over." He slapped Max's horse with his hat and the two men loped off together.

After a long moment of silence June said, "I wonder if Skip wouldn't be better off in the city?"

"Likely," Barr said. "But Max said no part of the Box C could be sold without your approval. Maybe you wouldn't want Skip to sell his share to me?"

June turned her face away from Barr and her long lashes dropped over her eyes. "I'll have to think about it—some."

"Some? How long would that take?" Barr asked, looking at her.

"A minute, perhaps," she answered.

Barr reached out and took the hand that rested on the horn of her saddle. She seemed content to let him possess it.

"I've waited almost twenty-six years for this. I guess I can wait sixty seconds more."

TRAIL'S END

at the HANGTREE



A New Novel by
DWIGHT BENNETT

I

Locked in his cell,
Cam Walgren heard the grim echo
of the voices of the
lynch mob coming to get him!

CAM WALGREN saw her across one of Concho's dusty, elm-shaded streets, waiting on the porch of a vine-covered white house with her father beside her. It was her father, all right; even a stranger could not have missed the resemblance, though the girl was the taller of the two and the man's face was seamed with coming age and crowned by thinning silver hair. You would have said he held a faintly beaten look, as though time had used him roughly.

Wedding Bells Ring Out in Concho—Plus

And they both were plainly waiting for someone, standing there close together and peering nervously down the silent street. Both were dressed as for an occasion, the girl in a well-cut suit with a bunch of flowers at her waist, the man in polished boots and town clothes that hung loose upon his wasted frame. . . . As Walgren stood in tree-shade watching the pair, he caught the remarks of a couple of men passing along the walk behind him.

"Quirt Strayhorn's sheriff, and his girl—all ready for the wedding. But where's Quirt? Suppose he's leaving 'em at the altar?"

The second man snorted in crude humor. "He's takin' his time; he knows Lila Royce would wait out there for him on the judge's steps all day. Hell, and why not? It ain't every day a gal can marry a soft job for her old man, and a spread the size of Quirt iron for herself. Yeah, them Royces—they sell themselves high!"

Cam Walgren came around, the quick touch of anger making his rope-hard hands tighten to fists. But he held himself, there being no cause for him to mix into this, and the two cowmen passed him with no more than a glance. He registered their faces in his mind, though—particularly that of the taller, dark-bearded one who had made the insulting remark about the girl named Lila Royce. Then he swung about abruptly and was moving away, heading back along the street in the direction from which he had come.

He didn't look again at the man and the girl, yonder on the shaded porch.

WALGREN had just hit this town, but he was ready now to get his bay pony from the public stable and take the trail again. Not that he had any clear notion of where his wanderings would take him from here. He felt suddenly lost, without moorings and without a compass.

When he reached the corner where this side street joined the main thoroughfare and a saloon door opened invitingly on cool and noisy interior, he went up the steps and elbowed through the swinging panels. At the bar he caught an apron's

notice and said, curtly, "Whisky. There's a bad taste in my mouth. . . ."

Cam Walgren took his drink slowly, and a second one. There was suddenly no hurry, anymore. He had wasted months and an additional hour now made little difference.

Though he tried not to listen to the talk around him, the room was loud with it—all following the one theme of Quirt Strayhorn's wedding. These were mostly Strayhorn riders he gathered, using up drinking money their bridegroom boss had passed out generously for the occasion. The center of the group—a big, slabby redhead named Bill Yuma—seemed to be ramrod of the Quirt iron. Liquor and his boss' marriage had turned the redhead's tongue loose on an endless stream of lewd observations, and once more Cam Walgren had to fight back an urge to put his knuckles hard against a man's lips and silence them.

What the hell? You couldn't fight a roomful; and a girl who made the kind of match Lila Royce had chosen for herself must know the kind of talk she was inviting.

Though, of course, if she actually loved this Quirt Strayhorn she wouldn't care.

Quickly getting his fill of the whole business, he threw down his money and left the bar, stepping out onto the wide main street where the straight up-and-down rays of the sun fell upon the dust with smashing weight. A tobacco store stood a couple doors along the way; Cam Walgren stopped here to replenish his used-up supply of rough cut. Then, coming out again, he angled across the street and moved slowly along the boardwalk in the direction of the livery—a tall, tired-looking man in his thirties, face strong-featured and dark tanned, spare frame whipped down by long hours in saddle.

He was just passing the two-story frame hotel when a raucous shout rang along the street behind him. Almost reluctantly he stopped at the corner of the building, and turned back for a look.

The ceremony must already be over, for whooping and shouting cowpunchers—one or two of them emptying six-guns at the sky—were running along the board-

the Deadly Spang of an Ambusher's Bullet!

walk trying to keep up with a shining, expensive top-buggy that had just turned off the street leading to the judge's place. Its red-spoked wheels caught the sun in a blur of light as it came through the dust behind a pair of nervous, blooded mares. Sheriff Royce and his daughter were on the cushioned seat beside the driver.

Though he had never laid eyes on the man before, Walgren had no trouble identifying the kingpin of Concho range. Quirt Strayhorn was big, big and confident and



LILA ROYCE
The Sheriff's Daughter

expensively dressed, a white Stetson sitting square above solid, handsome features. He had a carefully-tended mustache, flashing white teeth, crisply curling brown hair that he wore long. He looked to be forty years old, and he exuded an aggressive masculinity.

Strayhorn halted his prancing team in front of the hotel, where a noisy crowd was gathering; he returned their greetings with a nod and a careless flourish of whiphandle, while the older man swung down from his place at the other end of the crowded leather cushion.

CAM WALGREN saw the girl clinging to her father's hand, old Royce standing almost humbly in the dust by the front wheel, head bared, sun flashing from the five-pronger star pinned to his coat pocket. It seemed to Cam that Strayhorn gave scant notice to what the old sheriff was saying; the Quirt boss fiddled impatiently with his whip, and once he broke in on Royce's words to lean and shout an order at a man who came bustling out of the hotel with a pair of suitcases apparently belonging to the bride.

These were stowed into the back of the buggy. The girl leaned for a last kiss from her father, her arms tight about his neck as though reluctant to let him go. He turned away abruptly, went hurrying up the steps of the hotel, and after a few more moments of delay Quirt Strayhorn yelled at his team and the buggy pulled away from the hotel veranda and came on toward where Cam Walgren stood.

There was a narrow slot between the hotel and the neighboring building, and almost without thinking Cam stepped back into this, so that the two on the buggy seat would not notice him as they drew abreast. . . . Thus it was that the gunshot when it came was just behind him, its sound trapped and muffled by the walls on either side.

Momentarily shocked beyond moving, Cam Walgren saw Strayhorn's big body jerk as the bullet hit him, and begin to spill sidewise. The girl's scream jarred him out of this immobility. He heard the crunch of a footstep somewhere behind him and he whipped about sharply, one hand fumbling for a gun until he remembered he had left his holster and belt at the stable, hooked around saddlehorn.

The shadows of the passageway were dark contrasted against the day's bright blast, but he thought he caught movement back at the end of the slot. The ambusher, of course. Unmindful of danger to himself, Walgren had taken a pair of steps in that direction when the terrified squealing of a horse brought him up short.

Whirling back, he saw that the high-strung buggy team was out of hand, rearing and pawing in a rising billow of dust.

Cam Walgren didn't hesitate but went running quickly out into the street, right under those flashing, frantic hoofs. The great bodies of the horses reared above him, seeming to hang against the sky's startling blue. Then he had got his fingers around a bridle and was dragging against it with all his weight, and the buggy which had jackknifed around and come perilously close to tipping righted itself as he brought the team down and got them settled.

Through swirling dust he saw the girl, white with terror, one hand clutching the ironwork of the vehicle while with the other she tried to hold Quirt Strayhorn's sagging weight. The bullet had struck him in the throat; the red blood gushed out upon his expensive clothing and she had got some of it on herself. But in that instant, as her frightened glance met that of the man in the dust, recognition struck her like a blow; he saw her eyes widen, saw her lips form his name: "Cam!"

Before either of them could say more than that, a shouting and excited crowd was descending on them.

The first that Walgren saw was the red-head, Bill Yuma, a gun weighting his fist and his mouth opened on a yell of horror and excitement. "For the love of God! Quirt!"

They came in a crush around the buggy and its frenzied team, despite Walgren's vigorous protest: "Keep back, dammit! Leave room to breathe—and get a doctor!"

Someone grunted hoarsely, "There's no job here for a doctor! Strayhorn is dead!"

MEN were already lifting the limp and bloody weight down from the buggy. Cam stepped to the girl's side and reached to take her elbow but she didn't move, staring blindly ahead of her. The reaction of the thing seemed to have hit her all at once.

Then a hand seized Walgren and jerked him around, and Bill Yuma's green-flecked eyes were glaring hotly, his harsh words striking like hammer blows. "You dirty killer!" The Quirt foreman's heavy, red-furred fist slammed against Cam Walgren, jarring him back onto his heels; a big wheel of the buggy stopped him.

Dazed, he could only shake his head. "I didn't shoot him!"

"The hell you never!" Yuma's voice was high-pitched with excitement and fury, and there was a froth of spittle at the corner of his mouth. "I saw you, there in the alley. I saw you shoot him and then come running out and grab the horses."

"I tell you the shot came from behind me. I haven't even got a gun!"

But Yuma, clearly beyond reason, repeated doggedly, "I saw you!" And just then a Quirt rider came barging through the circle of hostile, grim-faced men, flourishing a weapon—a long-barreled .44 caliber Colt.

"Here's what did for Quirt!" he cried. "It was there in the alley, lying in the dirt and still smoking. He threw it away after he fired."

The redhead echoed, in triumph: "He threw it away, thinking he could bluff this through and save his neck. Only, the bluff won't work!"

II

A FIRST touch of panic went coldly through Walgren, as he saw the foreman's unthinking frenzy caught up by the faces circling him in. They were all Strayhorn men, shocked at his death and thirsting for vengeance against the one they thought was his killer. Cam forced a grip on himself, trying to talk sense past the wall of mindless rage they put against him.

"Damn it! Why would I murder your boss?" His voice was hoarse, throat burning with the dust and the need of making himself heard. "I'm a stranger! I tell you I never saw Quirt Strayhorn before!"

"You was hired, of course!" Yuma shouted back at him. "It's my guess you're some paid killer Judd Deming brought in to do the job. Naturally, Judd wouldn't want to risk havin' one of his own Diamond D hands pegged with the killing!"

Someone yelled, "Where's the sheriff? He went into the hotel; somebody get him out here!"

"Aw, the hell with the sheriff," another voice bawled. "Fetch a rope!"

Cam Walgren saw his time running out, then, and he made a desperate try. He hurled himself forward, throwing the weight of a shoulder squarely at the red-haired foreman who stood directly before him, and nearest to his reach. Yuma was

caught by surprise, hurled back into the arms of his friends with a squawk breaking from him. A hole was torn in the circling wall and Cam waded into this, throwing fists wildly, trying to find a break despite the heavy odds. But he knew he had little chance.

A roar of fury built and dinned about him. He saw a clear opening before him, briefly; then it closed in a solid mass of sweating flesh that he could not batter through. He struck it, was hurled back. And a six-gun barrel scraped the side of his head, sending him to his knees in the dust.

He knelt there, and through the ringing in his head thought he heard the girl's sharp cry of protest. There was a man's thin voice, too, shouting, "Stop this! Make way for the law, you hear me?" Then the gun barrel descended again and clubbed him to pain-shot blackness. . . .

* * * * *

When things cleared again, he found himself sprawled face down with his nose pressed into musty-smelling blankets. He knew he hadn't been out more than a few minutes; in fact, he thought he must have been half-conscious all that time. He could remember voices, dimly, and the jar of hands grabbing him and half-dragging him through the dust. Now he sensed the pressure of walls and room-trapped air, and also by the darkness knew he had been moved into some building or other, out of the sun's blast.

He tried to lift his head, to take his nose out of the smothering blankets. Someone said, "Hold it, will you?" and a hand pushed him flat again. Next moment fire ran across his scalp and he sensed that someone was working with disinfectant on the furrow that gun barrel had torn through his hair. He lay still, enduring the hurt. Presently capable fingers slapped a bandage into place with adhesive tape and the man said, "All right."

Gathering his strength, he pushed up groggily. He was on a cot. As his head cleared and a certain spinning in things around him straightened out he looked around and saw enough to tell him where he was. In jail.

At a desk nearby, the doctor—a young fellow with yellow Burnside whiskers—was packing his bandages and tools



CAM WALGREN

Accused of a killing

away into a black medical kit. Past him, Cam Walgren saw a barred window, and the jail-office door standing open on the sunsmitten day. In the opposite wall was the steel-plated door to the bullpen corridor. He would be inside there directly, he thought. But anything was better than a hangnoose.

ARGUING voices reached him, from in front of the jail. Bill Yuma and the Quirt men weren't giving up their lynch project without an argument, but they were meeting with stubborn resistance. Cam heard Yuma shouting, "Damn it, Royce! You're sheriff only because Quirt Strayhorn put you in office and kept you there. Now don't try standin' between us and the skunk that killed him!"

The sheriff's answer was tired but patiently firm. "You better go somewhere and cool off awhile, Bill. All of you. You know I can't do what you're askin' me!"

A rack with three shotguns in it hung upon the wall above the desk. Cam Walgren considered this, and then he looked at the young sawbones who was just snapping shut the clasp of his medical kit, and paying him little attention. It looked like

the best chance he would have of getting to one of those guns. He bunched his muscles; but next moment let the tightness go out of him, as he heard the girl saying, "Bill, please take the boys away and do as Dad tells you? That—that's an order!"

Dead silence, for a moment; then a few grunted, half audible words, and the reluctant shuffling of feet moving away along the warped plank walk. There was to be no defiance, then, to this first order from the girl who, in a few startling moments of time, had become both the bride and the widow of Quirt Strayhorn, and the new owner of the powerful Quirt iron. . . .

And now the doorway darkened as Sheriff Royce and his daughter moved inside the jail office. The doctor, on his way out, touched his hat to the girl as he stepped aside for them but she hardly seemed to notice. She had halted just within the threshold; and Walgren, sitting hunched upon the edge of the iron cot, returned her long and wordless stare.

Then the girl was coming forward into the room. Her pretty oval face framed in soft, dark curls was pale, her cheeks colorless, blue eyes wide with shock. Her red lips, trembling on words that would not be spoken, looked swollen; her full, rounded breast lifted with emotion.

She said, "Cam—Cam! *Why did you kill him?*"

For a moment he could find no answer. He came slowly to his feet, so that he stood looking down at her from his lean, six foot height. And she came straight toward him, lifting her face to his. When she spoke again her tone was altered, softened.

"It's been half a year, Cam Walgren! Have you been looking for me, all that time? And I didn't know! I thought surely you would hate me, after—after what had happened. I never dreamed you would still want me—enough to follow me all this distance. Enough to—"

For a throbbing instant the power of her, which had been sufficient to draw him over a months-long and empty trail, came full upon him—overpowering, now, with her nearness. Cam Walgren's arms came up blindly; he saw her eyes, so close to his own, flicker behind their long lashes, saw the tremulous lifting of her breath. Her lips were full and trembling, invit-

ing. . . But then a stiffness came into him and he straightened, letting his hands fall without touching her. He said coldly, "But I didn't murder your husband—*Mrs. Strayhorn!*"

It was cruel; his rejection of her was like a blow to the face; but he was too weary and sick of soul himself to hold anything back. He saw her recoil, and beyond her the white-haired sheriff made a strangled sound that was audible in the stillness of the jail. He went on doggedly:

"You think I killed Quirt Strayhorn in a fit of jealousy, don't you—after having trailed you for a thousand miles only to find you at last with his wedding ring on your finger!" He lifted his shoulders. "Why should I hold that against him, a total stranger? Or against you either, as far as that goes? I know a person can change in half a year, even though I maybe didn't. I hadn't any reason to think you would still care for me!"

TEARS trembled in her eyes. "But maybe—maybe I haven't changed, either!"

"Oh?" He couldn't keep the hurt scorn from his voice. "That would seem kind of strange, wouldn't it, coming from a girl who ran away from me to get herself engaged and married to another man? Or was it Quirt Strayhorn's ranch you were marrying?" Cam Walgren turned away from her ashen face, suddenly, putting up a despairing hand to run it through his tumbled hair and wincing as it touched the hurt and bandaged scalp. He threw a lost look at Sheriff Royce.

"Better show me to my cell, John," he muttered. "Before I say something needlessly cruel!"

At the entrance to the cell block, the old man's voice at his back halted him a moment. "You savvy why she ran away, Cam Walgren? Because she had to! We knew the law would be after both of us, on account of that irrigation company swindle. But I tell you, you can't—you *mustn't*—think Lila was in anyway to blame.

"Put it on me, if you like: I was a damn fool who fell into the hands of a crooked partner, and as a result you and your friends, that I talked into promoting the scheme, suffered. I swear to you, though, it was him who ran off with your money, not us. We simply ran because

I lacked the nerve to stay and take my medicine, and because I never dreamed," he added slowly, "that Lila felt the way she did about you!"

Looking straight ahead, Cam answered heavily, "We knew all about that partner of yours, John. We caught up with him a couple days later, took back the money he'd absconded with and got a full confession. That's one of the reasons I've been hunting for you, all this time—to let you know you were running away from shadows and there wasn't any charge against you." His mouth twisted, hard. "Still, it looks like I needn't have wasted my time. You've both been doing well enough for yourselves—you, holding down a hired sheriff's job. And Lila married to a cattle empire. . . . Like I heard somebody say, a while ago: *The Royces sell themselves high.*"

He shrugged, "I just hope your house of cards don't topple, now that the gent you both tied up to has been tagged by an ambush bullet. Seems to me the pair of you better go into mourning!"

Later, in a stuffy cell at the rear of the jail building, Cam Walgren relived that scene with bitterness, and with a kind of shame. Hurt himself, he had spared nothing; he hadn't even had consideration for the shock Lila Strayhorn must have undergone, having a man murdered in cold blood beside her, on a buggy's narrow seat. Whatever her faults, even if she had married for ambition and not for love, it hadn't been right to talk as he had to her.

Because, for all his harsh speech, he knew nothing was changed. He still loved this girl, as he had since the day she and her weakling father and their crooked, smooth-talking partner had first come into his life, promoting their irrigation project among his small-spread neighbors on a distant cattle range. What was more, he believed in spite of all appearances that she truly cared for him, and that seeing him again today had been for her a profoundly disturbing thing.

Yet, in that case, how could the girl sell herself, in a coldly ambitious match such as her marriage to Quirt Strayhorn had obviously been?

But right now, he reminded himself, there was a more immediate problem he had better be thinking about. He mustn't forget that he was in jail, with a murder

charge square against him!

Since being locked into the narrow cell, Cam Walgren had had no visitors. Pacing and smoking one cigarette after another through the long and dragging hours of the breathless afternoon, the sweat that stood upon him was not all due to the stifling discomfort of the cell. He couldn't see anything good in this setup. Thought of the blind passion and unreasoned hate arrayed against him was enough to draw out a man's nerves like fine-strung wire.

III

SOMETHING suddenly rattled against a bar of the high window, jerking his head up as taut nerves leaped at the sound. He stared a moment, stupidly, at the stone which had dropped through and landed upon the hard mattress of the bunk chained to the wall beneath the opening. Then a second pebble struck the metal bars and bounced off; and curiosity brought Walgren onto the cot, to peer into the cindered alley which lay behind the jail.

A man stood looking up at the window, a gaunt, black-bearded figure jiggling a handful of stones in bony fingers and preparing to make another throw. When he saw Cam's face behind the bars he nodded and tossed the rocks aside, a toothy grin on his thin-lipped face.

"Thought maybe you was asleep," he said genially. "Don't reckon I'd feel much like sleeping, was I in your shoes."

Cam Walgren recognized him; it was the man who had said, "Them Royces sell themselves high." Memory of the crude remark narrowed his glance in a scowl. "What do you want?" he demanded sharply.

Manner unchanged by his tone, the other said pleasantly, "How'd you like to get out of there?" He studied the window critically. "Those bars don't look like they're sunk too solid. I reckon a team and a length of chain ought to jerk 'em out pretty easy. Suppose you got a bronc, at the stable, that we could have here for you, handy?"

"Supposing I have," grunted Walgren, unbending in his suspicion. "Just why the hell should you want to risk breaking me out? I don't even know you!"

The other shrugged. He had the look

of a cowman, his California pants tucked into spurred half-boots, an unbuttoned calfskin vest hanging on his gaunt frame despite the heat of the day. "Judd Deming's the name," he said. "You done me a good turn today. Maybe without intending to. Even so, I'm a gent that appreciates a favor."

"I didn't kill Strayhorn; I suppose that's what you're referring to."

"Bill Yuma says—"

Cam cut him off, angrily. "I don't care what Yuma says. He was too worked up to know what he saw, though I don't doubt he's sincere about it. There was somebody behind me in that alley, and it was them that did the shooting and threw the gun away. I didn't even get a look, because the horses on the buggy started acting up."

Judd Deming made a gesture; he was obviously unconvinced. "Interesting yarn," he said, "but little difference one way or the other. All that matters to me is the guy's dead. In fact, half the town thinks I hired you myself to do the killing; and so I figure I might as well have the game as the name, as long as they aren't able to prove anything."

"That's why I'm willing to make a deal with you. I'll pry you out of that cage, supply you with a bronc and a clear route out of town, and pay you five hundred dollars, if you'll agree to finish this job for me on your way out."

Cam said, "What do you mean, finish the job?"

"Kill Yuma! You got excuse enough, after the way he clipped you with his six-shooter and has been making lynch-talk all over town. And me, I need him out of the way. With him and Strayhorn both gone, the fangs will be drawn from that outfit and nothing can stop me running my Diamond D herds onto Quirt graze that I'm bad needing. Sure as hell, no woman is going to stop me!"

At the evil assurance of the man, and the cold-blooded way he stood there and plotted murder and the despoiling of a neighbor's range, Cam Walgren felt a kind of nausea crawl within him. His hands tightened on the windowbars until the knuckles stood out white beneath the dark skin. He thought of Lila Strayhorn, and in the face of such naked greed as the Diamond D boss had shown him, it little mattered just then by what dubious means

the girl he loved had come into possession of Quirt iron. He said tightly, "You think you could buy me for a scheme as filthy as that?"

JUD DEMING lost his pleasantness; dark anger colored his bony face, and his mouth took on a sneer. "Suit yourself! It's all right with me, if you want to hang!" He added coarsely, "Or do you figure maybe you'll beat this murder rap? Just wait and see! Just wait and see if you can beat the hangnoose Yuma and the rest of that Quirt crew is talking up."

"Your time is running out, fellow. My money says you don't last the night. And when they take you and string you to a cottonwood gallows, just remember, I offered you a chance!"

And with that the Diamond D boss swung around and strode off down the alley, leaving his words to ring tauntingly in Cam Walgren's mind.

The prisoner was not to forget that warning. It stuck with him, as afternoon waned toward the golden hour of sunset and shadows lengthened beyond the iron-barred window; for, with each dragging hour, a certain danger became increasingly evident in the noisy temper of the town.

This came to him through the narrow opening of the window, in raucous bursts of drunken talk that came apparently from the saloons along the street. It came, too, in certain excited conferences that took place in the front office of the jail, too subdued, generally, for Cam to discover much of what was said, but once in awhile becoming audible.

As once when he recognized the scared tones of the yellow-haired doctor, saying in a sudden loudness, "I tell you, John, Bill Yuma wants blood! That whole Quirt crowd has drunk itself mean, and sooner or later they're coming after that killer." And, following a murmured answer from the sheriff: "You'd be a damn fool to try! You can't hold them off, and you won't find anyone else ready to sacrifice his own neck to help you save the neck of a murderer from stretching rope!"

The talk ended, in silence that still tingled with the threat of violence. Sometime later, Cam Walgren thought he heard Lila Strayhorn in there with her father but this time he couldn't make out

anything that was said.

He knew these lynching rumors were not idle talk. He had read the promise of this in Bill Yuma's stare and in the violence of his hatred. There was going to be trouble; he was sure enough of that!

A rattle of keys brought him around, suddenly, to the door of his cell. John Royce, with a defeated look in his pallid face, was sorting out the key and fitting it in the lock. His tired eyes met Walgren's and he said, harshly, "Step out!"

Cam's mouth quirked. "So it's come to a head? Lila can't keep control of that tough crew, now that they're hers, and I suppose you're going to turn me over to them!"

"Damn it, no!" The old sheriff was trembling with anger at the thrust, but he clamped his lips hard and swung the cell door open.

"I'm turning you loose!"

The prisoner could only stay as he was a moment. "You can't be crazy enough to do that—you know you'd never be able to explain! Where's the catch, anyhow?"

"For the love of God!" Royce cried, in an anguished voice. "You've suffered enough from me and my girl; can't you let us do one decent thing in return without suspicioning my motives? Now, hurry! Please—if you hope to clear out of town ahead of that lynch-mob!"

Cam Walgren shrugged heavily. "All right. I'd be a fool sitting here until the mob comes for me. If you're of a mood to open the doors, I'm in no position to examine gift horses."

He moved quickly down the corridor to the jail office. There was only one outside door, through which he would have to walk openly and into the street; he stood aside and let Royce take a first glance. The sheriff jerked his head quickly.

"Seems clear enough," he grunted, a tremor of excitement in his voice. "Some Quirt men it looks like, on the steps in front of the saloon, but they're not looking this direction."

"All right. Give me room."

CAM moved through the door, into the long slants of shadow and dust-filtered sunlight that filled the street.

His instinct was to break and run for cover, but he forced calmness into his movements, halting a moment on the

boardwalk and looking about him as though he had every right to be there. He saw the punchers at the saloon, and as he looked one of them swung his head and stared straight in Walgren's direction.

At that distance the man's face was a mere pasty blob, features hardly distinguishable. But, by the same token, he himself would be no more easily recognizable, and he endured the look, even walked a step or two toward the saloon. He halted again, with the alleyway beside the little brick building invitingly dusk-dark at his elbow, and reached in shirt pocket for papers and tobacco. As he began to put a smoke together he held his head down, letting the broad brim of his Stetson shade his face; from underneath he watched the man standing on the saloon porch.

When the man turned away to speak to one of his companions, Cam Walgren moved quickly. He sidestepped into the alley way and then, within its protection, picked up speed and went sprinting across the cinders. For a heart-stopping moment he thought he had heard a yell go up back there on the street. But, whether he had been spotted or not, his only course now lay straight ahead, across weedchoked lots toward the big bulk of the livery barn, where his horse would be waiting in a stall.

He had no gun. He didn't know what he would do if he met anyone.

When he sighted the rear of the stable, however, he had met no one and there had been no further warning of pursuit. He found the small side door, pulled it open and slipped through. A booming, musty silence met him; he had to wait a moment, blinking to adjust his eyes from the sunset glare outside. A sound to the left brought his attention quickly in that direction but it was no more than a bronc's unshod hoof striking stall-end, and he forced jumpy nerves to relax. After that he traveled forward into the dark barn, toward the stall where his own bay pony would be waiting impatient for his return.

A whicker greeted him, as the horse caught the scent of its master. At the same moment, someone breathed a whispered exclamation; and Cam Walgren, quickly warned, froze in a half crouch, seeking out a trap in the soundless shadows about him.

IV

HE SAW the pony's head above the stall timbers, but there seemed nothing else. Still, he waited. Suddenly then the animal gave a grunt, the kind a horse makes when the cinches are yanked up. And someone straightened into view, head and shoulders becoming visible there in the stall with the bay. It was Cam Walgren's turn to make startled exclamation. "Lila!"

As he rounded the corner of the stall, Lila Strayhorn whirled quickly from smoothing the saddle leather of the rig she had been strapping on the pony. He recognized it as his own saddle; his belt and gun were in place slung about the horn. At once the girl's hand was on his sleeve.

"You made it without any trouble?" she whispered tensely. "Nobody saw you?"

"I don't know, for sure." The nearness of her, in the half-dusk of the barn, was already working on him; he put this from him, moving in to test the cinches himself. He heard her saying, quickly:

"I thought I could help by having your outfit ready. I remembered the bay, of course. You let me ride him, one day."

She turned away suddenly, as her voice caught and broke; when he looked he saw that her slender shoulders were bowed forward, and shaking with the sobs she tried vainly to suppress. Cam Walgren could only stand there, wordless.

As quickly as it had begun, then, the weeping stopped and she had control of herself; but when she spoke again her voice was low-pitched and not steady. "I know what you think about me, and I can't blame you. I haven't any excuses. I consented to marry Quirt Strayhorn without loving him, knowing I still loved you, and always would. But it wasn't in order to get his ranch, or for any other reason such as that. I swear to you it wasn't!"

Cam Walgren tried to say, "It's none of my business." But he didn't trust himself to speak. Certainly he wouldn't encourage her to continue; he would not force a confession like this from any woman, especially not from a girl he loved as he loved Lila Strayhorn.

"Dad has had a bad life," she went on,

after a moment. "Since my mother died, he's had nothing to tie to, to stabilize him. I suppose you'd call him—weak. He's drifted, and played into the hands of wicked men. Men like that partner who double-crossed us all on the irrigation project. But finally we came here to Concho and things began to look better for him than they ever had up to now.

"Quirt Strayhorn took an interest in— in me. Mainly because of me he helped put Dad into the sheriff's job. And he's really been a good officer, Cam! Only a few of Quirt's personal enemies, like Judd Deming, would dare to claim he's knuckled down or run the law just to please one man. But—"

She faltered; the rest of it was hard for her to tell. "Well, Quirt proposed to me. He made it plain that if I accepted him Dad could be sure of a good job the rest of his life. But if I said no—" She shook her head, miserably. "One more failure would have killed my dad. And it seemed a small enough price! I had already lost you, months ago; since then, it hasn't seemed to matter much what happened to me."

Cam Walgren said, humbly, "Lila! Believe me, I—"

Next moment he was shoving her aside, whirling to his saddled bay and fumbling for the six-gun holster—slung about the saddlehorn. The warning sound of running feet on cinders was joined now by muted voices: "He's got to be in there! It's the only place he could of got to!"

"Cam!" exclaimed Lila. "It's Yuma—and the others!"

He muttered, "Out of the way!" and leaped into the straw-littered aisle that split the gloomy barn from front to back. The big double doors at the rear were closed, and held by a stout wooden crossbar; but the front entrance made a square of sunbrightness against the dark.

"Quick!" Cam heard the girl's tight whisper. "Take your horse and ride, before they get around to the front and cut off your escape."

He said: "Too late already!" For at that moment three men plunged through that front opening, silhouetted blackly. Cam Walgren flipped up his gun and sent a single bullet scorching down the long aisle. With a squawk of fear that trio split apart and dived back to safety, leaving the

doorway empty.

"We're sewed up in here," Cam Walgren said. They know if they keep every entrance guarded, sooner or later they can take me!"

LILA threw a desperate glance around, her pretty face pale in the half-darkness. There was a stamping and pawing in the stalls that lined the main aisle, as frightened broncs reacted to the booming echoes of the shot. Clutching Cam's sleeve, the girl said, "All these horses! Couldn't we—?"

He read her wild thought, and shook his head at it. "Yuma would be looking for me to try a trick of some kind. No, it wouldn't work." Suddenly, then, his arms were about her, his eyes looking deep into hers. "Listen, for your sake I don't intend to wait for them to rush the barn and find you here with me. I want you to hide, and, whatever happens, don't show yourself."

"But what are you planning?"

"To get it over with, quick!" he said grimly, "To take my bronc, and ride straight through that door."

"Oh, Cam! No!"

She flung herself against him, desperately. For a moment they clung together that way, he found her lips, warm and passionate beneath his own. Then Cam Walgren drew away, gun ready in one hand, using the other to disengage her arms from about his neck.

"Remember!" he breathed hoarsely. "Nobody's to know you were in here with me. It's going to be hard enough for your father to explain how I managed to break jail."

A sob was her only answer. Deliberately Cam turned away from her, moving to-

ward his waiting mount. He was just reaching for the stirrup when Bill Yuma came charging through that wide doorway yonder, a gun striking flame in his hand.

Lead clipped a roof support above Walgren's head, close enough that he flinched. Bill Yuma had a good eye, to match his nerve! Now, having made his daring entry against that square of light, he was into shadows and was hugging them closely, creeping forward in the shelter of stall partitions. And even as he felt grudging admiration for the nerve of the redheaded Quirt foreman, Cam Walgren was moving to meet him, gun leveled, and hoping Lila would keep low and out of the line of fire.

He dropped into the shelter of a hay bale as another shot lashed out, from an indefinite point ahead of him. Yuma's voice snarled, "I'm gonna get you, you dirty killer! I'm gonna put lead into you and watch you die!"

"You're making a bad mistake, Yuma!" Walgren answered into the musty gloom. "For the last time, I didn't kill your boss. I've got no particular desire to kill you, but if you got to have it this way, come ahead!"

There was no answer, but a moment later he caught the scrape of a spur rowel and then the head and shoulders of Bill Yuma shifted silently into view, above a partition up ahead. Hands tightening on his gun, Cam began straightening, carefully, until he stood at a half crouch and the other man presented a good target for his lead. He leveled on the dim outline, somehow not liking to shoot this nervy gent but knowing it was to be one or the other. The trigger bit into his finger . . .

[Turn page]

3 ACTION-PACKED WESTERN THRILLERS!

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With startling suddenness, a third weapon spoke from a stall directly across the broad aisle. Stricken motionless by surprise, Cam held his own fire and watched Yuma jerk and sag; and then the Quirt foreman was going down, falling clear of the partition and hitting the hoof-splintered boards of the aisle with a solid thud. He landed on his face, half-rolled to his back, lay without moving.

Belatedly, Cam Walgren started to swing around. A sharp warning from the darkness caught and held him: "Don't try it, unless you want some of the same! I've got you dead center, fellow!" And, as Cam hesitated, "Come on—throw down your gun!"

HE KNEW the voice, having heard it twice before. And he recognized that it spoke no idle warning. With great reluctance, he let his hand open, let the gun fall into the litter of straw at his feet. "Boot it!" He obeyed the order, giving the discarded six-shooter a shove with his toe that sent it out of reach, clear across the aisle.

Only then did Judd Deming move from the shadow of the wooden roof support, and put his gaunt shoulders against it while he rested the sights of his palmed and smoking revolver full on Walgren's helpless figure. A choked gasp, breaking from Lila Strayhorn's lips, put a quirk of wicked humor on his mouth.

"Didn't know I was anywhere around, did you, Mrs. Strayhorn?" he grunted. "I saw you come in and start throwing gear on the bronc yonder, which I had pegged as belonging to this gent here. You got me curious so I kept my mouth shut; and then he came, and I heard everything you said—*everything*. It was all mighty interesting. Especially when I seen you kissing the gent that murdered your husband, and planning to help him escape!"

Cam Walgren's fingers knotted into fists. "Damn you! Leave her alone, you hear me, or—"

"Or what?" Deming mocked him. He jerked his gaunt head toward the open door, where men were beginning to voice startled questions. "Hear that? The whole Quirt crew is out there, yelling for your blood. You're not in any position to make threats, against me or anyone else!"

He cut his glance to the girl. "And

you're going to tell folks just what I say for you to—that your boy-friend here killed Bill Yuma in their shootout. Otherwise there'll be some awful ugly stories for you to face and try to talk your way out of. How'll you have it?"

"I don't care what you tell about me," she cried. "I'll tell them myself. But you're not going to blame your own killing on Cam."

"All right, all right!" The Diamond D owner cut her off. "I thought maybe it would be like that; so I guess I'll just have to bump off the pair of you. All the wild lead that's been flying around in here, nobody's going to be too suspicious when they find an extra corpse, even though they may ask themselves what Quirt Strayhorn's widow was doin' here in the barn. Me, I'll just lie low, of course, until the excitement dies down and I can sneak out without anyone seeing me. And then there'll be Quirt graze lying all ready for me to move my beef onto it, and nobody left to give me even a minute's trouble."

The hammer of the six-gun started back, its muzzle trained squarely on Cam Walgren's belly. Sweat beading his face, Cam took that last moment as he stared at death to plead frantically with the girl: "Bargain with him, Lila! Don't mind about me. Let him finish me, and let him have the graze he wants. But don't throw your life away!"

"I wouldn't want to live," she choked. "Not on those terms!"

Then Sheriff Royce yelled, from the big front entrance: "Deming! *What the hell is this?*"

With a snarl of rage, the Diamond D boss whipped around. Perhaps knowing his daughter was somewhere in that barn where guns had lately been talking was what gave the sheriff nerve to come charging into danger. He had a gun in his fist, and the Quirt punchers were at his back. But just within the wide doors he hauled up—as Deming's gunhammer fell and drove a bullet into the sheriff's narrow body.

But Cam Walgren, seizing the moment's diversion, had hurled himself forward straight at Judd Deming, their bodies colliding solidly. The Diamond D boss was driven back against a stall partition. He brought the smoking gun with clubbing

force against Walgren, who threw up an arm to take the blow. Unarmed, he had to depend upon his fists; he drove a pistoning right into the rancher's bony face—once, twice. Deming grunted in pain. His head jarred back heavily . . . struck something. There was a sound almost like that of a cocoanut shell splitting.

HE WENT suddenly limp and Cam pulled away, watching the man crumple. Dully, he saw the heavy wooden peg fixed in the wooden wall for hanging saddle gear, and against which his blow had driven the Diamond D boss. He looked at the body crumpled at his feet and was unable to suppress a shudder. A strange and somehow horrible way to die!

Then he turned, to face the Quirt hands who had crowded into the barn and were looking at the body of their dead foreman, redheaded Bill Yuma. One big-boned puncher lifted a stare of fury, spearing the fugitive from the jail. "You—"

"Just a minute!" Cam Walgren snapped. "Judd Deming killed him—not me!"

"That's the truth!" the girl had recovered now from her grip of shock, and her quick corroboration put uncertainty into the Quirt punchers. They exchanged puzzled glances; one or two let the guns in their hands drop out of line.

But the rawboned spokesman was not finished. "Anyway," he bawled, "you murdered Strayhorn. You can't talk your way out of that. Bill Yuma saw you!"

"Yuma—was wrong!"

At the faint sound of her father's voice, Lila Strayhorn broke and hurried forward, forgetful of everything else. John Royce had pushed up on one elbow, was sprawled that way, his pain-glazed eyes bright with urgency; quickly the girl went to her knees beside him, a supporting arm thrown about his shoulder despite the blood that flowed copiously from the bullet hole drilled into his thin body. The dying man clutched at her hand, and his words came brokenly and with a tremendous effort behind them.

"I killed—Quirt Strayhorn," he panted into the taut stillness. "The way you were crying when we said good-by this morning, after the wedding, I—I knew all at once that you didn't love him—that he must have browbeat you into marrying

him, probably because of me. It was too late then—only one way to stop it—" His words faltered as he fought for strength to finish. "I hurried through the hotel and out the back way, got into position where I could make my shot. I did a good job. Nobody would have ever suspected me, but—this Cam Walgren had to get in the way and be saddled with the killing. And so—"

He stiffened, went limp with his head falling back against her. "Dad!" Lila Strayhorn threw a frantic look at the circle of silent men. "Quick!" she cried. "Get the doctor here!"

The dying man shook his head feebly. "No, girl! It's best this way. When Yuma made that mistaken talk about seeing Walgren shoot, I knew I was going to have to tell the truth and take my medicine—for the first time in my life! I couldn't let Cam Walgren pay for my crime. Because—you love him, and I—"

Despite her effort to hold him, the sheriff slid out of her arms and dropped into the straw, upon his face.

In the sudden quiet there was a scuffling of boots on the splintered planks as the Quirt crew exchanged uneasy looks. Someone said, hoarsely, "Aw, hell! Let's get out of here! And we better take Bill Yuma and that Diamond D hombre with us!"

But before they left, the rawboned puncher stopped long enough to tell the girl, in a gentler tone, "Far as we're concerned, you're the new boss; it's none of our business how Quirt rawhided you into marrying him. We'll be ready any time you have orders for us. Meanwhile, we'll try to keep folks away from this stable and give you a chance to get ahold of yourself."

They clomped out with dragging spurs. And Cam Walgren moved forward to where the girl knelt, weeping, beside her father. "Lila—" he said, and faltered. He put a hand upon her shoulder; she didn't speak, or look at him, but she reached up and covered the hand with her own. They stayed like that a moment in the stillness of the barn.

This grief, he knew would pass; and when it did they could put all the wasted months behind them. The long trail had brought them at last together. It could not fail to have its bright ending.

THE BLOWUP

*Maybe he was just an old pest,
but Mike sensed a new danger!*

IT WAS hotter than the seven milltails of hell. The air hung heavily in a stagnant, motionless pall over the entire countryside. The smoke from the little log cabin near the edge of the mountain clearing climbed straight up from the chimney in a slate-gray pillar, finally to fan out hundreds of feet upward into a small, mushroom head.

Old Mike Morrison went to the door of the cabin and spat a stream of tobacco juice into the dirt alongside the walk. Little spit-devils of dust leaped upward, exploded, and settled back to cover the damp, brown stain of the tobacco with a powdery gray coating. Old Mike rubbed his gnarled hand over the stubby whiskers on his grizzled chin and looked at the sky. A little later, when the hot August sun was higher up, it would be a scorcher. Even in the dark of the forest that surrounded the clearing the pine needles would rustle on the trail and the dead branches would pop with the dryness.

Old Mike knew it was just a matter of time.

by **EDWARD B.
REYNOLDS**



Rifle in hand, he started up the trail, all his fears alert

After forty-odd years in the timber country he didn't need anyone to tell him that the lid was ready to blow off and rip things wide open.

But even as he stared at the purpled hills the thought of the new forest supervisor flashed through his mind. He forcibly pushed his uneasiness aside, and his bushy eyebrows knitted into a deep scowl. In his sudden anger he spoke aloud.

"By God, all hell can break loose and I won't raise a finger to help him."

Old Mike went back into the cabin and began frying himself a batch of sourdough pancakes. When he finished he picked up the crisp bacon from the back of the stove, the coffee pot, and sat down to the white oilcloth-covered table against the wall. Then he reached over and switched on a small walkie-talkie short wave radio. His son, Chet, had left the radio with him so he could listen in on the Forest Service calls.

As he sat eating and waiting for the radio to warm up, his thoughts again turned to the supervisor, bringing a flush to his leathery cheeks. He again experienced the humiliation he had felt at the dressing-down the man had given him in front of Pete, Chet, and all the rest of them. Particularly in front of Pete and Chet—his own boys to whom he had taught the ways of the woods and in whom he had drilled the code of the Forest Service.

OLD Mike had gone up to the blaze on Lonesome Ridge to lend a hand. He hadn't liked the new field supervisor from the first. The guy had a rawboned ranginess all right, but he talked like a schoolmaster.

A school book ranger, Old Mike thought to himself.

The blaze had been pushing them back and they were getting ready to establish new fire lines.

"Run 'em along the ridge to connect up with that rocky stretch," Old Mike had suggested. "It's a natural barrier."

The field supervisor had turned on him and told him to keep out of the way.

"We're quite capable of handling this with our own methods," he had snapped. "You'd do a lot better if you kept out from under foot."

Old Mike wasn't the type who would

take that from any man, old and retired though he was. They had had a terrific argument and the field supervisor had raised Cain with Chet. That was why Chet had left the radio with his father so he could listen in on the calls. But he had made the old man promise to keep away from the fire lines in the future.

The radio began to crackle and Old Mike reached over to adjust the tuning dials. It was time for the morning round-up between Headquarters and the line camps. There was a voice from Headquarters on the air now.

"Calling Dry Gulch. Ca. Dry Gulch. This is Headquarters. Come in, please. Over."

"Headquarters. This is Larson of Dry Gulch. Larson of Dry Gulch. The fire is now under control. We are mopping up. That is all. Over."

Old Mike chuckled. "That is all," he mimicked. "Good old Pete, a little bit impulsive and hot-headed, but he gets things done."

Old Mike thought back, of the time when Pete Larson and Mike's son, Chet, were growing up together. Pete's father had been killed on a fire on the Kootenai, and Old Mike had practically raised the kid.

Pete and Chet were opposites. Both youngsters had thought there was nothing about the forests that Old Mike didn't know, and there was nothing that he couldn't do. But it was blond, wiry Pete who was the dare-devil, who did what Mike said without question.

Chet, although the physical image of his father, had his mother's skepticism. Of late he was becoming somewhat irritated with his father. Since he had been retired the old man had found it hard to stay away from the fire lines if they were close by, and several times he had caused some trouble.

Headquarters called up several other line camps but none of them were having it rough.

"Lucky," Old Mike murmured to himself. "But they'd better not be too sure. This is the kind of weather when a real smokechaser keeps his pack fully equipped, and he's ready to take off at the drop of a hat."

Old Mike reckoned he'd like to see a little hell break loose. "Then we'd see

whether that new ramrod is capable of handling things in his own way." But the thought brought feelings of guilt and his old uneasiness returned. "This weather's too damn dangerous to be thinking thoughts like that," he concluded.

Old Mike was like a work horse turned out to permanent pasture. He had been retired from the Forest Service and was living on his pension in the little log cabin he had built years ago in his younger days. But things hadn't panned out the way he had thought they would.

His wife, Elsa, had died first and after that he had found it hard to keep occupied. He always seemed to have that restless feeling. Now that he no longer had his work a feeling of hopelessness had been added. If he had been the kind of man who could give up and wait quietly for the end it would have been better. But he wasn't. He couldn't let things ride; he had to do something about it.

HE LIKED to prowls along the forest trails looking at the trees, estimating the dryness of the duff and the fire danger, watching for excess underbrush and down timber that might be hazardous. While he was on these trips he would carry his high-powered twenty-two rifle, pretending that he was hunting for rabbit or other small game in season. But it was just a pretense. His feeling was all for the land, the timbered hills that he felt belonged to him.

Old Mike began to fiddle with the dials on the radio, anxious not to miss a thing that was going on. He thought to himself that Pete had been mighty lucky in getting that fire under control. He'd have to watch it closely because a sudden wind would scatter it high, wide, and handsome. As hot and dry as it was, even the slightest breeze would raise holy terror.

Old Mike went to the door and took another look out. The air was as stagnant as ever. There wasn't even a bend in the column of smoke from the chimney. According to the radio reports there was no cause to worry, and he tried to tell himself he shouldn't be uneasy. But he was as nervous and jittery as a cat at a dog show.

The radio started to crackle again and Mike went back to the table. The same voice was repeating.

"Calling Dry Gulch. Calling Dry Gulch. This is Headquarters. Come in, please. Over."

"Headquarters. This is Larson of Dry Gulch. Larson of Dry Gulch. Over."

"Headquarters to Larson. Get this, now. Take all the men you can spare and go to Ronson Ridge. The fire has jumped the lines and is down in the valley."

Old Mike's ears pricked up. That's the fire that Chet was on. He must be in plenty of trouble. The fire must have flared up and it must be making its own wind to have moved that far during the night. He could see it in his mind's eye—the blaze roaring along through the tops of the trees, sucking the cooler air in behind it until it raged with hurricane speed. Anything could happen with a fire like that on a day like this. The forests had been drying out all during the hot days of July and the forepart of August. Now they were like tinder, ready to go up in smoke at any moment.

"Get going as fast as you can," the voice on the radio continued. "Supervisor McLean is leaving from Headquarters with a crew of men and will join you at the Ridge. Did you get that? Over."

"Larson to Headquarters. Larson to Headquarters. Okay. Will meet McLean at the Ridge. Over."

Old Mike sniffed. McLean. That was the young field supervisor he had had the run-in with. What did that whipper-snapper know about a runaway fire? Now we'll see just how good he and his book learning really is.

It wasn't that Old Mike had a scorn for colleges and college men. He had insisted on both Pete and Chet continuing their schooling, and it had been a great day for him when they had received their degrees from the School of Forestry of Montana State University. No, he didn't have anything against a college education; he just didn't like to have his nose rubbed in it.

But the thought of the field supervisor made him furious. "Him and his fancy lingo," he stormed. "Retarded combustion. Meteorological phenomena." Old Mike snorted and sputtered tobacco juice in his disgust.

"Retarded combustion. Phenomena. Any blockhead knows a fire needs oxygen to burn. If a fire uses up all the oxygen there is, it's either going to go out or it's

going to get more oxygen. It doesn't take any college professor to figure that out."

Old Mike bristled all over and glared around the room for several seconds before he realized he was all alone talking to himself. He almost could see Pete and Chet sprawled in the two chairs on each side of the fireplace, their long legs draped over the arms and quivering with laughter. He could hear one of them telling him, "Take it easy, Pop, or you'll blow a skull fuse."

THE thought of Chet and Pete tempered his fury. After all Chet was fighting that fire and Pete was on his way. Much as he'd like to see McLean, the new supervisor, get his come-uppance, Chet and Pete would be in on it, too. And you never can tell what a big fire will do. You just can't count on a big fire. You figure on one thing and it'll do the opposite.

Old Mike got up from the table and began clearing away the dishes.

"I never should have promised Chet I'd stay away from the fire lines," he grumbled. "By George, I'm a taxpayer, aren't I? Who does that guy McLean think he is? These forests belong to all of us, and it's up to all of us to look after them."

But even as the old man blustered he remembered that his cabin was on Forest Service land. It was as Chet and Pete had pointed out: if he made too big a nuisance of himself he could be moved off the clearing and be forced to live in Missoula where he would be out of the way. He grew cold and worried just thinking about it.

Old Mike finished drying the dishes and sweeping the floor. When he had everything shipshape he went outside and began to potter around the driveway where he was building a border of white rocks. As he nervously fitted the rocks into place he kept eying the thin gray plume of smoke that extended upward from the chimney of the cabin. He was starting after more rocks when he impulsively turned and re-entered the cabin where he lifted his twenty-two rifle from its pegs and dumped some shells into his pocket.

"By George, he can't stop me from doing a little hunting if I want."

Closing the door of the cabin, he climbed into the rickety old car that was

parked along one side of the driveway and started off down the mountain road.

"I'll just take a little ride in the direction of Ronson Ridge. I don't have to go all the way. No use getting Chet into more trouble. But a little ride in that direction won't hurt."

As the car bounced along the road winding in and out of the trees, eating up the miles with each chuffing breath, Old Mike began to smell the smoke from the fire. Its acrid sting in his nostrils stimulated and excited him. Soon he was close enough for the thick haze to obscure the bright rays of the sun which now burned through the yellowish-white veil like a big red ball of half cooled molten copper.

In a short time he reached the turnoff where the trail up the hill to Ronson Ridge joined the road. He had parked the car and was sitting there, his nerves jumpy and fidgety, when he realized what was wrong. It was absolutely quiet. The realization wiped out all thoughts of his promise to Chet to keep away from the fire lines and McLean. All the fears he had been dimly sensing jelled into a picture complete in its clarity. He automatically grabbed his rifle, leaped from the car, and started at a ground-eating lope up the trail.

It had suddenly dawned on him that the air was just as still and stagnant as it had been back at the cabin. The needles on the big pines were motionless; even the leaves on the squat quaking aspens that bordered the road were barely quivering. There was not a sound to be heard. The stillness was so absolute that it was startling, and it set his heart to pounding with ominous portent. By all rules, that close to a big fire, there should be a strong breeze, and the noise of the wind back of the fire should sound like the roar of an express train. Yet here, all was quiet.

Old Mike gasped with the strain of hurrying up the trail. Ordinarily he would have walked around fallen logs, conserving his energy. But now he pulled himself over the top of them, pressing onward, upward. The fearful pounding of his heart, coupled with his physical effort, brought a sharp pain to his chest. But he wouldn't stop. He was almost exhausted when he reached the top of the rise and looked down on the valley where the fire was.

IT WAS a little pocketed valley, not much more than a couple of miles across and five or six miles in length. Except for the thick yellow smoke that hung low over the tops of the trees and below the level of the surrounding ridges and peaks, there was little sign of fire. The outline of the trees beneath the pall of smoke was motionless; there was no crackling of embers, no puffs of smoke, no eruptions of sparks. There was only the shimmering heat waves and a deathly silence.

Old Mike walked slowly along the ridge, his eyes searching the valley. As he rounded a turn he came across the others gathered at a point where another trail, screened by a cluster of trees and great boulders, came up the mountain-side. There were Pete Larson and his crew and McLean and his men. McLean was dominating the conversation.

"Man, this is a relief," he was telling Larson. "I thought the very devil himself would be broken loose up here."

"It is rather quiet," Larson answered.

"Yes, it's a real break," McLean answered him. "Without any wind we'll have this under control in no time at all. Morrison's already down there. We're in contact with him on the radio. You go down and lend him a hand. I'll go back to Headquarters. I don't think you'll need me."

Old Mike heard McLean's words but they brought him no reassurance. From out of the dim recesses of his mind he was recalling another day more than forty years gone when he had stopped at a cabin in these same forested hills to say hello to Elsa, the girl whom he later took as his bride.

It was just a day as this, dry and stifling hot. He had told the others to go on, that he would catch up with them. But he had stayed longer than he had intended, even though they were hurrying to the scene of a forest fire that had been reported out of control. He shuddered as he remembered the sight he had seen hours later when he reached the fire.

As Old Mike's eyes searched the valley McLean looked up, saw him standing there, and started toward him. "Listen, Mr. Morrison—"

"You say Chet's down there?" Old Mike burst in.

"Listen, Mr. Morrison," McLean interrupted. "I don't want any trouble with you on this job. You come along with me and leave these men alone."

Old Mike ignored him and turned to Larson.

"Is Chet down there?"

"Yes, he is, Pop," Larson answered.

"Where's the radio?"

Larson nodded his head, his eyes indicating a man holding a mule with a portable strapped to its back.

"You in contact with them down there?" Old Mike asked.

The man nodded.

"Ask them if it's stifling hot; if it's hard to breathe."

After a while the man turned to Old Mike and reported, "He says it's a son-of-a-gun. Choking. Awful."

"That's what I thought," Old Mike snapped. "Tell him to get his men out of there as fast as he can move. Tell him to cut loose the packs and equipment and leave them. But tell him to hurry. To come on the run. There's no time to lose."

"Don't do any such thing," McLean roared, advancing toward the man with the radio. "I'm running this show. You do what I say."

Old Mike leveled the twenty-two rifle and pulled back the bolt, slapping a cartridge into the chamber. His eyes were threatening. "I'm taking over from now on," he said evenly. "You step back there, McLean, if you don't want a slug through your guts." He turned to the radio operator. "You tell Chet what I told you to tell him."

"But, Pop!" Larson stepped forward.

"Stay where you are, Pete," Old Mike warned him.

"Tell him!" he insisted to the radio operator.

WHEN the operator finished and indicated Chet's acknowledgment, Old Mike turned to Larson, "Listen, son. I'm afraid that Chet won't realize how important it is to hurry out of there. I'd go down after him myself, but I don't think I can make it. Do you think you could do it?"

"But, Pop. This doesn't sound like you at all. You always said to fight the fires at any cost. Never to run away from a fire. Now—"

"Son, I haven't time to explain it." The old-man's voice was pleading, entreating. "It's up to you. It's dangerous, but I think you can make it. But for God's sake, hurry!"

"Okay, Pop."

Larson started down the trail at a dog-trot, and Old Mike sighed with relief. Pete still had his old unquestioning faith in him. He was a good boy. The old man turned to McLean.

"Maybe I'm wrong about this, Mr. McLean. But I think those men should be gotten out of there as fast as possible."

McLean's eyes were hard. "I've warned you before, Mike," he told the old man, "and I've warned Chet. I told him to keep you away from these fire lines. But this time you've gone too far. This time you've gone absolutely berserk. There will be nothing less than the penitentiary for this job."

Mike was silent, but he kept his rifle cocked and his watchful eyes on the man with the radio and on McLean. Far below he could see Pete Larson disappearing into the haze. Beads of sweat gathered on his forehead as he waited. His hand holding the rifle wavered. McLean started to move forward.

"Hold it," Mike snapped.

"Look here," McLean told him, his voice a little softer, a little more sympathetic as if he were beginning to realize the strain the old man was under. "I'll give you one more chance. Let the radio man tell them to go back to work and we'll forget about it."

"We'll wait!"

As McLean stepped back his eyes had a quizzical, probing look but his mouth was grim. His was the stern, show-me attitude of one who coldly weighs the scales and just as coldly abides by the results.

It seemed like ages to Old Mike before he saw the group coming out of the smoky haze. The pain in his chest tightened and his heart pounded as he watched the men clamber up the mountainside. He felt like he was making the climb with them. If he could only get them to hurry. He was shaking and exhausted as he slipped the rifle on safety and sat down on a stump. Chet, the last man, had come over the rise and was hurrying toward him.

"Dad, Dad," Chet called. "Now you've done it again." Old Mike tried to rise, but

sank back. "Gosh, Dad. I don't know what I'll ever do with you."

Old Mike raised his hand. "Wait!"

Behind them the trees were beginning to stir under a giant's breath. The rustling sound became louder. A gust of wind reached out fingers and ripped a hat from one of the men's heads. It went sailing far out into the valley, slowly spinning around and around as it was sucked downward toward the trees. The hat almost reached the upper branches when the blowup came. It came with a roar that shook the mountainside.

One minute the yellow, sickly-looking clouds were there; the next, the valley was a roaring mass of flames. It came with the force of an explosion that was instantaneous. There was nothing but tumbling masses of orange-colored matter that billowed up thousands of feet. The valley had become a licking, ravening blast furnace, the heat of which pushed the men back down behind the protection of the other side of the ridge. It left them terrified and limp.

They hugged the ground trembling, powerless against the mighty force of Nature on the rampage. There was nothing they could do but lie there and pray that the conflagration would be confined to the tightly-pocketed valley. At first they could hardly breathe, their chest muscles constricted so tightly. Their eyeballs felt as if they were being seared right out of their sockets. But later, as they relaxed, the air that rushed up the mountainside and down over the top into the valley cooled the sweat that bathed their bodies so that it left them shivering.

OLD Mike was so exhausted that for a while he lay there as if dead. Chet and Pete had worked their way close by. He could see McLean watching him from behind a rock where he had huddled for protection. He tried to analyze the look McLean gave him; to see if it was really friendly or not. Then he realized he was too tired to care.

But as they lay there it seemed as if a Miracle had happened. It seemed as if a Divine Power was directing the scene, because, as far as they were concerned, they knew they were as ants under a steam-roller. Of course, it could be explained that the force of the blowup was so fierce

that the all-consuming flames burned themselves out in a short time. Anyway, after a while the wind and the flames died down, and they were able to get up. After that the men were kept busy patrolling to check the fire from leaping over the rocky ridges surrounding the valley to the trees on the other side.

Yet even after it had died down, the blowup was an awesome thing. Weeks later when men would be able to go down into the valley they would find the charred bodies of grouse, squatting in exactly the same positions in which they had been roosting when alive. And there would be the blackened carcasses of deer and other animals standing rigidly with their legs braced as they had stood sniffing the air when the fire caught them.

Old Mike was thankful as he made his way wearily down the mountain toward his car that there would be no charred bodies of men down in that valley. It was only by the Grace of God that he had broken his promise to Chet and had gone to the fire. And it was only by the Grace of God that he had known what was going to happen when he got there. He remembered that other day long ago when he had seen a similar sight, and he trembled as he remembered how only the merest coincidence had saved him.

Elsa had told him there was a reason. That's the way Elsa had been. She was the philosopher who kept him calmed, the governor that kept him under control. He supposed that were she alive she would be telling him that the day's events were but a pattern of things that were meant to be. Now that he had done his part he should be content to keep out of the way and let others take over.

He thought of Chet and Pete and how narrowly the two boys and those who had been with them had escaped a horrible death and he was thankful. But he guessed maybe he should take a back seat from now on.

He was part way down the mountain-side when he heard the whistles and his name being called. It was McLean.

"Mr. Morrison, I owe you an apology. I'm afraid I have underestimated you and the value of your experience."

"Forget it," Old Mike said. "After all, my own son was down there, too."

"No, no," McLean insisted. "It was

more than that." He was having a hard time repressing his excitement. "In all my career I have never seen such a demonstration. The contributing factors—the high ridges enclosing the valley—the fire getting away to a good start, then lying dormant after it had used up all the oxygen in the valley—the stillness of the air outside the valley, with the lack of currents and movement close to the earth—the heat generated inside the valley drawing the cold air up the outer side of the mountain and over the ridge. It will certainly make a valuable paper, but because of the many contributing factors I'm not quite sure of my terminology."

THE lines around Mike's eyes crinkled ever so slightly, but his answer was stiff. "I reckon you'll just have to call it a blowup, Mr. McLean."

"But the important thing," the supervisor went on, "is that you had the experience to recognize what was happening. If it hadn't been for that—" He shook his head. "I hope you will help me with the paper by checking it for accuracy. If we can get the experiences of some of you old-timers to others, it will mean the saving of lives and property."

As the light of understanding slowly crept over him, Old Mike's heart swelled with happiness. So he wasn't through after all. He still had work to do—useful work. While he shook hands with the supervisor he realized that despite McLean's strange ways and foreign talk they had the same goal in common—the protection of the forests.

With that realization Old Mike cast out the bitterness of his feud with the supervisor along with his own physical weariness. His cup of happiness was completely filled when he heard McLean call after him as he was going to his parked car, "And another thing; anytime you want to come to a fire I'm working on, you'll be more than welcome."

Yet, even as Old Mike answered respectfully with a "Thank you, sir!" a certain perverse realism made him grin secretly and pat the butt of his rifle.

"I guess at that it will be better now that it's legal like," Old Mike chuckled. "Elsa always allowed as how I was good at making resolutions but not keeping them."



H.W. Kienle

*There were two
big events due that night, a dance
and a tough gunfight!*

The **QUARREL**

A Western Classic by **ERNEST HAYCOX**

JIM VAN HORN left his ranch in the Yellow Hills before daylight Saturday, reaching Two Dance by ten in the morning. Even then the town had begun to fill with cattlemen and riders from the roundabout country. Homesteaders' wagons were parked under the courthouse cottonwoods, and a sign on the Odd-fellows Hall said, "Dance Tonight," and a

traveling dentist had set up his portable chair at the corner of Arapaho and Custer streets. Slat McGinn and Charley Engleman were standing in front of Donlake's store; he wigwagged at them and turned into Menefee's stable to leave his horse.

As he came out afoot he noticed Drake Purple riding full tilt down the street, but he thought nothing of it until Purple

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yelled at him and charged through the stable's archway. Van Horn avoided being run down by a quick side jump and a slow irritation stirred in him as he crossed the street and joined McGinn and Engleman. Both these men laid their usual cheerful insults upon him, as old friends will do, and he parried in kind and the three had about decided on a drink when Purple crossed from Menefee's. Slats McGinn happened to be speaking, but Purple, who never bothered about manners, broke in with his stiff, blunt voice:

"You're all a dry-looking lot."

"That subject," rejoined McGinn, "has been discussed and shortly the complaint will be taken in hand."

"In order to give this crowd some reputation for honesty," said Purple in his pushing way, "I'll string along." He meanwhile took time to fabricate himself a cigarette. He was a short, heavy figure stained half-black by the sun, with meaty, weather-cracked lips and heavy white teeth and a pair of stone-colored eyes, which even in the man's lightest moments were strong with bold self-will. He said to Van Horn, "Haven't seen much of you."

"Been working over near the reservation all summer."

"Bring back any Indian beef?"

"Couldn't steal a thing," said Van Horn, smiling.

Drake Purple swiped the cigarette with his tongue. "Now that you have lied like a gentleman, let's go get the drink."

THERE was a malice in Purple always close to the surface; he had no gift in getting along with other people and his record was one of sudden quarrels and long-continued contentions. From most men the remark would have gone unnoticed, but from this rough-tongued owner of the Broken Bell outfit it was something that jarred the indolent ease of the others, producing immediate reserve. Van Horn ceased to smile; he gave Drake Purple a straight, searching glance and he obviously took a good deal of care with his reply, finally saying, "As for honesty, you would scarcely be a competent judge, Drake."

He had framed his remark to suit the other man's humor; if Purple had intended to crowd him, he would crowd back. Purple could take it or he could leave it, and meanwhile he continued to watch Purple with an inexpressive reserve. He had his answer soon enough: A red stain moved up Drake Purple's neck and spread into the mahogany darkness of his skin. The muscles of his jaws bunched and he drew in a breath of wind and he seemed on the verge of expressing it; but instead he cast a furious glance at the three men before him, dashed his cigarette to the ground and wheeled away.

Neither McGinn nor Charley Engleman commented on the scene. It was Van Horn's quarrel and therefore the general etiquette of the situation indicated that they remain silent. It might blow over or it might be serious. Meanwhile, Van Horn thoughtfully watched Purple move up the street and pause by Orv Ghent, who was a rider of questionable morals, and at last go into Corbin's saloon. Van Horn shrugged his shoulders. "Well," he said, "we were talking about a drink."

They went into Faro Charley's, once again cheerful, and had a drink. Everybody felt good to be here after a long summer's sweating on the range and Jim Van Horn stood at the bar's end and swapped talk with men he hadn't seen since spring. He was soft of voice, he had long, rawboned arms and a willowy body, and when he got to swapping talk with his friends a bright and rash humor flashed up through the grave, false innocence of his eyes. He was twenty-seven and the owner of a small outfit back in the Yellows; and sometimes in the midst of the talk he had a way of falling silent and looking across the room at nothing in particular, as though arrested by some strange sound or color or thought.

He hadn't been in Faro Charley's more than a quarter-hour when Orv Ghent came in. "Jim," he said, "Purple is in Corbin's and says he expects an apology."

News of the quarrel had already gotten around, and the crowd in the saloon now grew silent. Ghent, who was an unpopular man, was not easy in these surround-

ings. Charley Engleman and Slat McGinn moved forward until they stood near Van Horn, but nobody broke into Van Horn's thoughtful debate with himself.

"Tell Drake," he said finally, "there is no cause for an apology."

Orv Ghent nodded and left the saloon. Slat McGinn said: "As I was saying, how about another drink?"

Charley Engleman shook his head. "Drinking can wait."

"For a fact," spoke up Van Horn, and strolled from the saloon.

He left behind him a largely silent group. All these men were friends who knew him well; but they also knew Purple's fighting reputation and now were troubled. "I don't like this at all," said Slat McGinn. It was as far as he would go in expressing his doubt of Jim Van Horn's survival in such a battle, but Charley Engleman understood the rest of it and nodded. Little Con Spencer, an interested spectator to the recent scene, spoke his mind aloud: "He's up against the dirtiest fighter in the country."

Con Spencer was the one to know about that; for Con, little as he was, had unlimited courage and his courage had taken him into a brutal fist fight with Purple, the result of which was a crooked arm, four bent ribs and a permanent limp. Slat McGinn said: "Don't publish the fact, Con, and bring Drake down on you again."

Meanwhile, Jim Van Horn loitered under the shelter of the sidewalk's board awning, eyes half closed against the silver glare of fall's sunlight on the deep dust of Arapaho Street, and the milky rolling of this dust as horsemen and wagons moved steadily into town.

PARDEE'S Rafter W crew came into town with a racket and a rush and a patient in the dentist's chair shouted. A group of homestead women came down the walk, momentarily stopping Van Horn by Donlake's store. He stood out of their way and he lifted his eyes over them and saw Orv Ghent step from Corbin's and move at him through the risen dust, and at that moment a free, warm laugh broke

through his preoccupation. Lowering his head he saw a girl in the store's doorway.

She held an armload of packages with round, firm white arms and all he saw at the moment was a pair of lips and a pair of eyes smiling at him above the heavy load. Other people, moving into the store, had unsteadied her, and it was the quick and pleasant way she looked at him that made him step forward and lift the top packages from her arms. She was a straight, robust girl and her upper body was round, and on the sun-dusted tint of her face lively interest ran and suddenly disappeared behind gravity.

Orv Ghent reached him and said: "Drake says for you to look out for yourself."

Van Horn moved the packages from one arm to another and for a moment his glance lifted above Ghent and ran out beyond the town and the hills and he stood still, quietly thinking, and afterward looked at Ghent again. "Tell him I'll do that."

Ghent swung away without further comment. Van Horn turned to the girl and said: "Where do I carry this for you?"

The liveliness had gone from her face and she watched him with the deepest and most solemn attention. In the beginning it had been the tone of her voice which had arrested him; now it was the straightness of her shoulders and the rounding of their points and the strength that seemed to be in her.

"Our wagon is by the courthouse," she said, and fell in step with him. Her head came to his shoulder and when he looked down he saw the sun-dusted shading of her skin and the half circle of her lashes. She was, he supposed, about twenty-three; and there was an old-fashioned ring on the little finger of her right hand. A hundred feet beyond the Cattle King they turned into the area of cottonwood and box elder and ash which surrounded the courthouse, threading the askew ranks of wagons until they reached a big bay team. She put her package in the nearby wagon bed and relieved him of the ones he had carried for her; she

turned and gave him a swift smile. "Thank you," she said, and immediately looked down.

He was bound nowhere and in no haste to leave. He had exhausted his cigarette and now rolled up another. "Homesteading?"

"We're on Weeping Woman Creek."

"My name," he said, "is Jim Van Horn."

Liveliness came again to her face and again went away. "I'm Margaret Calhoun."

"That ring reminds me of one my mother had."

"It was my Grandmother Liggett's. She came from Kentucky. We all show Kentucky on us—we're all Kentucky dark."

"Dark?" he said, and looked steadily at her. "No," he said, "not dark." He dragged the last smoke from the cigarette in a deep breath and looked to the ground, and now that his eyes left her she was free to watch him. Grave as he was, she noticed the simmer of energy in him; polite as he had been toward her, she had observed the latent dance of humor and deviltry in his eyes. "Not dark," he said, "but fair." He looked up after he said it and caught her eyes, and then she turned her head aside and hoped she was truly as fair as he had said.

Donlake and Faro Charley came through the parked wagons and paused, and the girl, now in the background, saw the quick and alert way Jim Van Horn turned to them.

Donlake said: "We'd like to go see Drake and try to find some way of settling this. There shouldn't be a fight between you."

The girl noticed that Van Horn lifted his head again and looked into the far day with the same close-thinking expression she had before seen, and she observed how grave the other two men were. Van Horn finally said: "If you want to go on your own hook—but not as agents of mine or asking anything for me—I do not object."

"Certainly," said Donlake. "We will not discuss the merits of the quarrel at all. Maybe there's a way of getting around it—both your feelings might be saved in

the matter."

"Luck," said Jim Van Horn, and watched them depart. He had not shown any particular feeling but when he turned his attention to the girl she saw the gray of his eyes and the straight line of his mouth. He shrugged his shoulders and presently said as an idle thought: "Going to be a dance here tonight."

SHE didn't answer. She met his eyes and she looked at him as thoroughly and as directly and as frankly as he looked at her. Excitement brushed over his face and it was as though a long, cool wind rushed through her. He lifted his hat and swung away.

He had eaten noon meal at the Cattle King and he was in the lobby with Jack DeSmet from Little Jacket Valley when Donlake came in with Faro Charley. Donlake said: "We went to him. We said we carried no offer from you and that you had no offer to make. He said it was the same way with him, that he had made his statement, that he would not back up from it."

"Wasting your time," said Van Horn.

"Then we asked him if he felt bound to settle the question before he left town, or whether it was just a general statement which might mean tomorrow or next week. He would not commit himself as to time. We think we can work on that point."

"If we meet face to face, there will be no next week."

"We mentioned that to him and then asked if he would object to a truce until a deadline of four o'clock, in which time you may safely pass each other without expecting trouble. That gives us four hours in which to try to work out some basis of satisfying each of you. He said he didn't object. Agreeable to you?"

"Yes," said Van Horn.

"Now," said Donlake, "we've got another idea to work on. Suppose we set a meeting place, you and Drake to arrive at it the same moment, neither before or after the other, and talk it over?"

Van Horn considered that fully and at last shook his head. "It would then appear

I was anxious to make a settlement."

Donlake tried another tack: "When had you expected to ride out of town?"

"I will not leave this town now before Drake does."

The two moved away. Van Horn said to DeSmet, "We'll have snow before usual this fall," and left the Cattle King.

It was then one o'clock and the town grew steadily fuller, but the wagons and saddle horses had been pulled away from the street racks so that now the space from the Cattle King on down to the depot was clear. The town expected a fight and was preparing for it. Slat McGinn stood in the full shine of the sun near Besson's saddle shop, apparently half asleep on his feet, a cigarette dipped down at the corner of his mouth. At the corner of the brick bank building, Charley Engleman squatted like a reservation Indian, facing the entrance of Corbin's. These were his closest friends; they were watching the street for him.

He crossed the street, feeling the eyes of this town upon him; and as he passed people he saw the swift looks they gave him—the human and inquisitive search for the fear they suspected might be in him. Conrad Spencer sat against the wall of Menefee's, his small body stooped on a box and his crooked arm lying across his lap; and as Van Horn went by Conrad the man gave him a look, hot and bright, and murmured: "Never turn your back on him."

Reaching the foot of the street, Van Horn looked back and saw Drake Purple leave Corbin's and go over to the Cattle King. Van Horn stood against the wall of the small yellow-brown depot and built a cigarette.

Purple came out of the Cattle King and met Ghent, who had posted himself on the porch. Ghent said: "He's down by the depot." Crossing toward Corbin's, Drake Purple had his impulse to slip back of town, circle and catch Van Horn off balance. But he put the thought aside, knowing that McGinn and Engleman were both watching him.

After Purple had gone into the saloon,

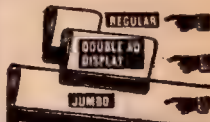
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Slats McGinn made a little sign to Charley Engleman, who rose from the courthouse steps and walked behind Corbin's to keep an eye on the rear entrance. At the same time Leach O'Leary looked on at the passing scene and recalled a brother who, riding across Broken Bell range, had never been seen again; and from her room over Corbin's Saloon, Square Madge watched all this with her private memories, remembering that she once had been a homesteader's wife. Drake Purple had been an attractive man in those days to a woman often as lonely as she. Now her husband and young son were somewhere in Montana and she was here, Drake Purple soon tiring of her.

IT WAS two-thirty when Donlake and Faro Charley came down to the depot where Van Horn still loitered. Donlake took off his hat and rubbed the sweat from the brim. He said: "We only got an hour and a half to go. Time's gettin' short. You will not meet and you will not ride out of town." He stood silent a moment, as though weighing the advisability of his next statement, then said: "Would you say that your remark to Drake was in answer to his remark to you?"

"Yes."

"You meant neither more nor less by your statement than he meant by his? If he meant nothing unfriendly, neither did you?"

"That's right."

"We'll work on that—a mutual withdrawal of remarks."

Van Horn watched them go up the street, traveling slowly as though they then knew the fruitless end of their efforts. He kept his eyes on them and his own thoughts ran ahead so that he witnessed the final scene, his lids coming together and the bright sun dying from his vision. The vision turned red and he opened his eyes and saw that he had his glance fastened to a tub of red geraniums on the porch of a house across the street; and he laughed to himself and crossed over, breaking off a cluster of flowers. As he came up Arapaho Street, Slats McGinn stepped from Besson's saddle shop and

handed him a gun and belt. "It is three o'clock," Slats said, and moved away.

He buckled on the belt, still walking. Engleman, now at the bank corner, pointed to Corbin's and shook his head. Van Horn reached the bank wall, facing the courthouse square. A man passed in front of him and threw a curious glance at him; but he didn't see that, for his eyes were on the Calhoun wagon and the girl sitting in its seat. He watched her a moment, and went through the wagons toward her. She had a piece of knitting in her lap and her fingers swiftly moved the needles and her face was solemn and soft.

He stood by the wagon hub and looked up, smiling to her; and she knew that he saw everything about her and was pleased with what he saw, and the effect of it was a warmth all through her. She held her eyes away from him until she was sure he had really seen in her what he wanted to see; then she looked at him.

"Come down," he said.

She stepped to the wagon hub and felt the guiding of his hand as he reached out. She stood before him, wondering what thoughts he had behind the dance of light in his eyes. He had been grave to her and somewhat shy at the first meeting; now there was a change in him. He lifted the small spray of red geranium and he laid it against the side of her head. "That would be pretty," he said, and handed it to her.

She murmured, "If you want it there," and tucked the stem into her hair. She turned quickly away and moved into the shade of a cottonwood. She wheeled and faced him, her back to the cottonwood. She watched him come forward and squat on the ground and look down at it, his hand drawing irregular patterns along the earth. She was above him; she sat down so that she would not be taller than he was. He had ceased to smile.

"Ever been in the Yellow Hills?"

"No."

"Now's a pretty time of the year there. My ranchhouse faces a creek and in the morning there's a little thin fog on the creek and then the sun strikes it and it shines like diamond dust. You can smell

the pine and the dry grass. I'm about five hundred feet off the valley floor. I look out on it and I can see the smudge of Hat Ranch, twenty-five miles away. Sometimes at night there'll be a campfire clear over by the bad-land breaks. Like a star blazing."

"You're lucky to live as you want to live."

"When I stand on the porch I get to thinking it isn't complete. What's one man standing there alone?"

"You can ride. You can come to town. You can go to dances and dance with whom you please."

"When I ride home, I ride home alone."

SHE sat silent, her shoulders slightly rounded at the points, and her hands were long and straight and strong, and she met his eyes and didn't look away. Homesteaders moved through the wagons and youngsters ran in groups past, shouting as they hurried. Jim Van Horn built a cigarette, thoughtfully watching his fingers; and when he put it to his mouth he looked at her again so keenly that she knew how much he wanted to say. The warm feeling rushed through her again and then vanished, leaving her very cold. Donlake and Faro Charley came off the street, walking as though they were tired.

"There's nothing more to say," said Donlake. "It is a quarter of four. Good luck."

They delayed, but they said nothing more. Looking carefully at them, she saw that they were deeply moved and that they were really saying good-by to him; and then they turned away. Jim Van Horn crouched on the ground and coolness made his face heavy and far-off thoughts held it still. She gripped her hands tightly together and held back all that she felt, all that was forlorn and full of fear and she cried out silently to herself: "Why does it have to be this way?" But none of this was for him to see.

He lifted his head. "Margaret," he said, "will you go to the dance tonight?"

"Yes."

He rose and for a moment gaiety

[Turn page]



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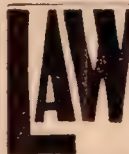
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showed through his solid expression, for a moment the old deviltry danced and made him very young. "That's the way it should be." He stood before her; he bowed and murmured, "Never dark—never to me," and turned to the street.

It was close to four and the smell of what was to be was strong through town and there were no women along the walk and men had withdrawn to doorways and alley entrances, all of them watching with their shadowed, strange thoughts. He noticed Square Madge at her window above Corbin's and saw her lift her hand to him; when he passed Menefee's stable Con Spencer's deep, breathless whisper touched him: "Watch for a trick!" Beyond Menefee's he stopped. Slat McGinn stood at Faro Charley's across the dust and McGinn raised a finger and pointed toward the foot of the street; swinging on his heels, Van Horn saw Drake Purple turn the corner of the depot and step forward.

Drake Purple was four hundred feet away, coming on. Waiting out the interval, Jim Van Horn had time for free thought, and during that time he felt the town's singleness of attention, its grisly, blood-stirred interest in the kill to come, and recalled how many people were here who, from past injuries, hated Drake and wanted to see him dead. He knew how much hope they placed upon him, but he knew too how little chance these people felt he had; and he knew the odds laid in Faro Charley's. Then he recalled how quickly the quarrel had produced it and he searched himself for wisdom and rightness.

For a moment he listened to his conscience and for another moment, he sought for fear. There was no fear, unless fear was the coldness now coming upon him and the greater and greater feeling of being alone. The sweetness of Margaret Calhoun was near him and about him and he had his sharp regret of that which might have been and soon might never be. But if a man loved the fun of life and if a man believed in the freedom of life, he could not turn aside from the black moments which came along. "It is better," he thought, "to be dead than ashamed,"

and felt cleansed by the thought.

Drake Purple moved on at a steady walk, neither hurrying nor slowing his stride. This was part of the terror he meant to send out before him like a first bullet. He was a broad, dark man and he paced the western side of the street so that the sun would be out of his eyes, so that it would be in Van Horn's eyes, and his arms brushed gently back and forth across his coat, outside of which he had buckled his belt.

Dust puffed up around his boots, the loose and deep yellow dust, six months dried by summer.

HE WAS two hundred feet distant when Van Horn left the walk and faced Drake. He heard the sudden scuff of men who, now bracketed in the range of possible fire, changed location. He stepped on, watching Drake Purple's shoulders sway. He saw the heavy man's lips spring back once, showing the sharp whiteness of his teeth, and come together again; and when no more than a hundred feet separated them Jim Van Horn took his eyes deliberately from Drake and stared toward the depot and slowly shook his head.

That motion stopped Purple. For Purple, a tricky and suspicious man, suddenly seemed to feel teachery around him. It was a new thought and a powerful thought and, as he came to a stand, this thought hurried him, and got into him and made him draw. The drop of his shoulders signaled the beginning of the draw and by that signal Jim Van Horn took his cue. The shots were two echoes, slamming together and the wind of one of those shots was a pulse against Jim Van Horn's cheek. He watched Drake Purple stagger and scoop a hand across his chest and he watched wild shock break over Drake's face and he saw it fade into the loose, blind expression which was death. Then Drake fell and men ran out of Faro Charley's.

Van Horn stood fast. McGinn pushed through the forming crowd and presently stepped back and drew a short straight line across the air for Van Horn's infor-

mation. Con Spencer limped up from the stable, his features cramped by a strained eagerness, and now the street was full and men shouted out the news: "He's dead!" Van Horn turned away. He handed the gun to Slat McGinn, who ran up, and Slat hit him on the shoulder: "As I was saying, Jim, it is a thirsty day—"

Van Horn struggled past people who wanted to congratulate him and his long legs took him fast by the Cattle King and through the parked wagons of Courthouse Square. Margaret Calhoun stood by the cottonwood. She hadn't moved from it and he noted the strained and haunted expression on her face. She stared at him, long and close, and then she came forward and touched him with her hand, and the touch seemed to release everything in her and she put both hands on his shoulders and dropped her eyes to the ground.

"Did it mean so much to you?" he said.

"I said to myself," she murmured, "that nothing good ever dies." She lifted her head and he saw the smile, the small and sweet and quiet smile, return with its light and its warmth.

"As to the dance," he said, "I'll be here for you at seven o'clock. Your folks won't mind?"

"I'm twenty-three," she said. "I speak for myself."

He watched her a moment, graveness still upon him after all that he had gone through.

Presently her nearness and warmth thawed him and he lifted his hat and, smiling, moved away.

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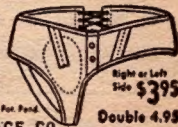
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